SONIC THE HEDGEHOG™

In The Fourth Dimension

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Virgin Publishing

A
RETRO
READING
TIME
RELEASE

RetroReadingTime.com

For Krisztina Samu

First published in 1993 by Virgin Publishing Ltd
332 Ladbroke Grove
London
W10 5AH

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ISBN 0-426-20403-4

THE SONIC STORY SO FAR

There was a time when Mobius was a peaceful world. And the Green Hill Zone was the most peaceful and pleasant and generally all-round cool place to hang out on the entire planet.

Mobius's inhabitants were, and are, talking animals of all types. The hippest, streetwise dude of all was, and is, a hedgehog named Sonic.

And of course it just had to be Sonic who stumbled into the laboratory of Mobius's only human, the kindly but absent-minded Doctor Kintobor.

Dr K was perfecting a device — the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor — to attract all the evil on Mobius and contain it within six emeralds he called the Chaos Emeralds (neat name, Doc). He found the time to help boost Sonic's already radically fast footwork, too, and with the help of a special pair of drop-dead cool red trainers, Sonic exceeded the speed of sound. And he turned blue, of course.

Sonic superspeeded all over Mobius, searching for the Grey Emerald that would neutralise the evil contained in the Chaos Emeralds. But before he found it, Doctor Kintobor's absent-mindedness brought disaster to the whole planet as he entered faulty data into the ROCC. The

device exploded, releasing the Emeralds, scattering protective golden rings across the length and breadth of Mobius, and transmogrifying Kintobor into his exact opposite: the evil, power-crazed, obese and egg-loving Doctor Robotnik.

Robotnik's influence reached across the entire planet. Once-verdant landscapes were transformed into polluted wastelands. The evil Doctor's robots scoured the land for animals to imprison, and in particular for the one super-fast hedgehog who has the power to foil his plans — Sonic.

And Sonic has foiled Robotnik's plans — at least twice, by the time you read this book. But Robotnik is ineggshaustibly, eggsasperatingly resilient. Once again, he's back. And that means trouble for Mobius in general, and for hedgehogs with red trainers in particular.

PROLOGUE

There is a Green Hill Zone, far far away. Under it runs a series of caves and tunnels that nobody knows about. Well, none of them except one. And, as it just so happens, this one has just squeezed his bulbous form out of the equally bulbous aircar that he refers to as his Egg-o-Matic, and stands on two spindly legs in the middle of the largest cavern, surrounded by strange equipment and fascinating flashing machines.

As bald as an egg, his round face is decorated with an enormous moustache in a bright flaming red that matches his shirt almost perfectly. His black trousers seem to button almost exactly halfway up his large stomach, and his feet are large and pointed. Two things float in the air around him at all times: the horrible smell of rotten eggs, and a high-pitched chortling laugh which he will break into at a moment's notice.

In his left hand he holds a strange device. It is made of shining metal, about thirty centimetres long. Coils and curves twist around each other, and it hurts the eyes to gaze at it for too long. He waves it like a conductor waves a baton.

‘Robots!’ he shouts. A group of five metal figures, looking like large beetles standing upright on two hind legs, stride out from a tunnel. The fat figure slots the strange metal implement into a cavity in the chest of the first robot. A small door glides shut over it, hiding it from view.

‘You have your orders?’ the man demands brusquely.

‘Yes, Master,’ the robots reply tonelessly.

‘How many times — ha ha ha! — how many times do I have to tell you? It's “Yes, your Supreme Imperial Highness President-for-Life, PhD”! Are you ready to change history?’

‘Yes, Master.’

‘Then go and do it!’ The robots do not reply but, as one, they flicker for a moment like a badly tuned television, then vanish into nothingness. The would-be Supreme Imperial Highness President-for-Life looks around the cavern, grinning widely.

‘At last! At last! Ha ha! Now, Sonic, you hyperactive herbivore — ha ha ha! At last I have the ultimate weapon! I have time on my side; and now, time will tell! Ha ha ha ha!’

1
BAFFLED, BOTHERED AND BEFUDDLED

It had been a long, exhausting adventure, but Sonic knew that the end was in sight when the enormous spacecraft swooped down through the clouds and zeroed in to hover above the patch of jungle where he was standing. Its six guns swivelled jerkily in their mountings, trying to get a good aim at him.

‘Yikes! Watch out!’ warned Tails. ‘It'll fire three times, then drop a Mega-bomb.’

Sonic nodded grimly, concentrating on the task in hand. If he didn't get this one just right he was dead. He hefted a coconut and lobbed it skywards. It curved up in an arc, over the bulk of the huge ship, landed with a *Poink!* on the back of the ship, bounced off and fell back to the ground.

‘That's no good,’ Tails observed unhelpfully. ‘You've got to hit its cockpit — the bit that looks like it might be eyes if the thing was a giant squid, which it isn't of course, but…’

‘Tails?’

‘Yes, Sonic?’

‘Shut up!' Sonic hefted another coconut and hurled it expertly at the spaceship. This one sailed straight and true and the massive alien craft flickered and shook from the impact as all of its guns fired at once. The hedgehog dodged away left, easily avoiding the salvo of energy beams, to the convenient pile of coconuts stacked nearby. He chucked two more into the air and dodged the next blast of beams, watching with delight as his missiles

smashed into the top of the ship. Two of its massive guns were now out of action, their mountings coconutted into twisted metal.

The hedgehog darted from left to right, grabbed a final coconut, leaped high into the air and hurled it down with a wallop in the middle of the cockpit, smack between where its eyes undoubtedly would have been were it indeed a giant squid. Bright light exploded from every point in the ship and it promptly fell apart with a shaking, groaning roar that rattled the speaker of the Game Gear. Sonic stared down at its screen in surprise.

‘ “YOU WIN”? You mean that's all there is to it? I thought you said this was a tough game!’

‘It's really tough. It took me weeks and weeks,’ Tails protested. ‘I just didn't expect you to be so flipping good at it. *TreeMan II: Moss Perot's Revenge* is a really good game when you get into it.’

‘But I did get into it,’ Sonic replied. ‘I got so far into it that I came out the other end. In an hour and a half.’ He put the sleek black shape of the Game Gear on a nearby rock. ‘I dunno, man, TreeMan's just not a convincing hero, specially for a real champion like me. No way can I believe in a bogus wooden dude whose catchphrase is "I'll be bark!".’

Tails sniffled. ‘I'm sorry, Sonic. It's just that you're — well, you're so good at everything and I try to be as cool as you but it's really hard. I do my best. Really. Like at video games — ’ He paused to blow his nose noisily on one of the twin tails that gave him his nickname. ‘But you're so heroic and spiky and blue that a little orange fox like me has no hope of ever, ever being as good as you…’ His voice trailed away pathetically.

Sonic looked at his little pal. He knew that Tails was not as good as him, and he knew why: because nobody

else, anywhere, ever, was half as good at anything as Sonic the Hedgehog. But all the same, he felt bad to see his friend getting upset about it.

‘Chill, little dude,’ he said. ‘You're still half my age, you've got plenty of time to get better. And let's face it, you've got the coolest teacher in the world to help you out. Now, what'll we do with the rest of this most triumphantly glorious afternoon?’

It was a glorious afternoon. The sun shone down from a pure blue sky, warming the Green Hill Zone, possibly the most beautiful area on the planet Mobius. It was an unspoiled paradise with gently undulating hills covered in thick green grass, decorated with attractive flowers and beautiful tall palm trees, and with plenty of cliffs, slopes, ramps, bridges and tunnels for the fast friends to race along, while streams, waterfalls and rocks made good obstacles for them to practise their jumping. There were even strange looped constructions where the two friends could perform their special stunts at top speed.

Sonic and Tails stood in the middle of this tropical splendour. A few faint wisps of cloud decorated the sky, and the whispering roar of the waterfalls could be heard in the distance as the streams poured down into the huge lake, where other inhabitants of the Green Hill Zone would undoubtedly be playing on a fine afternoon like this. Tux the penguin would be sporting with Joe Sushi, a grouchy but amusing walrus. Porker Lewis the pig would be teasing Johnny Lightfoot the rabbit, while Flicky the bluebird fluttered above their heads. Meanwhile, kind-hearted Sally Acorn the squirrel would probably have prepared a picnic for them all.

‘Shall we go and join the others?’ Tails suggested, cheering up a bit at the thought of some food.

‘Good call,’ Sonic agreed. ‘Race you. Loser does all the washing-up after the picnic!’ He glanced around but Tails was already a blur of orange streaking towards the lake like a small furry thunderbolt. His twin tails were whirring like a propeller, giving him an extra boost of speed. In a second he was over the top of the next hill and almost out of sight.

‘Give the little dude a head start,’ Sonic smiled to himself. The hedgehog started running on the spot, spinning his feet faster and faster until his special running shoes were a blaze of red on the ground. Then he crouched down. His spikes curved over his back to form an almost perfect circle and his whole body started to spin on the spot like a blue flywheel. He had done this many times before and knew the exact moment to let himself go, which was… Now!

With a whoosh, he shot off across the bumpy ground, spinning over the grass at an incredible speed. Trees and bushes flickered past in a blur as he sped towards Tails. As the fleet-footed fox looked back to see where his friend was, Sonic hit a slight bump and flew up into the air, soaring over a stream and two trees to land back on his feet just in front of his pelting pal.

‘Gotcha!’ he shouted into the wind. ‘And now I'm going to beat you!’ He raced away towards the lake, but Tails was not going to lose so easily. Whirling his tails, he put on an extra burst of speed and gave chase.

As the two topped the last hill before the lake, they were almost neck-and-neck. Below them lay the sandy beach, the other animals lying in the bright sunlight in an array of fetching beachwear.

‘I'll – beat – you – yet,’ Tails panted, pounding his paws against the ground as fast as was foxily possible. Sonic smirked to himself and pushed up to top speed for the final

sprint. He began to draw away from the frantic fox. Then, unexpectedly, his foot caught on something sticking up out of the ground, and he fell, sprawling, to the ground. Tails, hard on his heels, tripped over Sonic's leg and went flying. He landed further down the hill and rolled out of control down to the bottom, across a stretch of open ground, over the beach, through Sally Acorn's carefully prepared picnic and into the lake. He hit the water with a great splash that drenched everyone, and sat up in the shallows, coughing and spluttering. Everyone was staring at him. He waded ashore, looking at his feet, unable to meet their angry gazes.

‘Sorry,’ he muttered apologetically, squeezing the water from his tails. ‘Was an accident. Didn't mean to go so fast. Won't happen again. But — ’ he added, cheering up a bit, ‘did you see me? I beat Sonic! I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life.’

‘Well done,’ said Sally Acorn, her brown fur splattered with cream from one of the cakes that Tails had rolled through. ‘Since you're now the fastest creature in the Green Hill Zone, you can do all the washing-up for the picnic. It shouldn't take a speed demon like you more than half a minute.’

‘Aw no!’ exclaimed Tails. ‘Not fair! The *loser* was meant to do all the washing-up, that's why we were having the race. Sonic, you tell her.’

The blue hedgehog had trotted down from the top of the hill where he had tripped, but his mind was clearly on other things. In his paws he held a strange object made of some kind of metal. It was about thirty centimetres long, twisted and rusted, with bits of moss and lichen sticking to it. He was staring at it carefully as he approached his friends.

‘Hey, any of you guys recognise this?’ he asked. The friends shook their collective heads. There was something very odd about the way that the lines of the metal curved and twisted around each other to form strange whorls and knots. Tails was certain that he had never seen anything like it before.

‘It doesn't look like anything that Robotnik has ever made,’ he said. ‘It's much too intricate and complicated for that. The only things that were left in the Green Hill Zone after the last time he tried to take over Mobius were a few springs, some of those computer screens and all the millions of bits from the robots you smashed. That definitely isn't any of them.’

‘Smart thinking, my foxy friend. I was just gonna say that,’ said Sonic. He turned to Porker Lewis, who was studying the device carefully. ‘What do you reckon, Porkie? You're a boffin-type science dude.’

‘Whatever it is, it's a single machine, not some part of a bigger device. That much is obvious. And the dial and button on its side don't work any more. Where did you find it?’ asked the pig.

‘On top of that hill. I was hitting terminal velocity, my foot hit this thing sticking out of the ground and boom. Wipe out!’ Sonic grinned. 'That was why Tails beat me, so I hereby volunteer my most excellent and totally heroic washing-up skills to the aid of this picnic. Unfortunately.’

‘You can *both* do the washing-up then,’ said Sally, who was beginning to get annoyed. ‘And there'll be plenty of it to do, after your small friend did his speeding steamroller impression through the middle of our picnic. Just look at the mess!’

She turned to point at the offending scene of chaos, but there was no mess to be seen. Nor, for that matter, was

there any picnic. The lakeside beach where all the food had lain was completely bare and empty. There was a moment of complete silence as all the friends digested this fact, and then another silent moment as they realised that facts would probably be the only things they would be digesting this afternoon. The tranquillity was broken by Sally.

‘Who did this?’ she protested. ‘That isn't funny! Whoever took all the food, bring it back right now! When I get my paws on —’

‘Yo, Sally,’ Sonic interrupted. ‘Chill. Nobody took the food; it's just gone. Look at the sand.’

‘It's sand, Sonic. Just ordinary sand.’

‘No way! Look! The sand on our beach was always pure and white, like sugar. This stuff's all coarse and rough, and, um, there are sharp stones in it. And look closer. Where's the footprints?’

Everybody stared hard at the place where they had been laughing and playing a few minutes ago. Sonic was right. The sand, now a dirty grey colour, was completely smooth, with no sign of their tracks, spilled food or the path where Tails had rolled through the picnic and into the water. As the group stepped towards it, the new surface of the beach felt hard and gritty under their feet. The lake water that lapped against it in little waves looked more murky and unpleasant than it had done a minute before.

Johnny Lightfoot stopped and sniffed the air, his rabbit nose twitching. ‘Does anyone else smell something nasty?’

Sonic took a deep breath, and almost choked on it. ‘Yuck! Yeah! I recognise that unsavoury whiff, dude. Did I ever tell you gang about the place where Robotnik was pouring hot oil into the oceans to pollute them, last time he was pulling his megalomaniac stunt? He called it the

Oil Ocean Zone. The water was so foul and full of gunk you could almost walk on it. Tails and I trashed all his machines up good, but the zone smelled just like this.'

Tails nodded. 'Yeah. I was very scared. But what could be causing it, Sonic? He had a huge factory in the Oil Ocean Zone, and there's nothing like that around here.'

Sonic bent down to look at a stone on the beach. 'I dunno. Porkie, you got any science-type clues about what's going down? Is it anything to do with this weird thing I tripped over? Did that activate something, maybe?' There was no answer. 'Porkie?' Sonic asked, picking up the stone and looking around. There was no sign of Sonic's piggy playmate.

'WHOOOOAH! Whatever it is, it got Porker! Everybody stand very still!' instructed the hedgehog. He was feeling rather confused by these recent events, but he knew that as the Green Hill Zone's resident hero, it was up to him to take charge and show some leadership. Otherwise the other animals might start to panic, which would be a bad thing, and Sally Acorn would start to boss them around, which would give Sonic a headache.

He looked around the small group of friends who stood cowering on the beach. A dark cloud had blown in front of the sun, throwing gloomy shadows over the area, making them look more forlorn than they probably were. Sonic counted their heads to check who was still there: Tails; Sally Acorn; Flicky the Bluebird; Johnny Lightfoot; Chirps; Tux; Joe Sushi; and there was someone else.

'Porker?' he called hopefully, but as the new figure turned to look at him he realised it was someone else and his heart sank. 'Hey, who are you, and what are you doing here instead of my pal Porker Lewis?' he asked.

'Stop fooling around, Sonic,' Chirps said. 'It's Carrie.'

‘Carrie?’ asked Sonic, looking at the newcomer. She was large, standing several centimetres taller than the others, and she had powerful limbs and big buck teeth, built for gnawing. Her tail was long and thin. She looked like a fat rat, except that she was too big and her claws were rather too long and sharp. ‘Carrie?’ asked Sonic again.

‘Yeah, Carrie who?’ Tails demanded uncertainly.

‘Carrie the Coypu, you twit,’ answered Sally Acorn. ‘She's lived in the Brown Hill Zone longer than you have.’

‘The WHERE?’ exploded Sonic and Tails in unison.

‘Oh, stop it you two,’ Sally said. ‘The Brown Hill Zone. Here. Home. Who's this Porker Lewis bloke you were talking about?’

‘Yeah,’ Flicky added. 'Porker who?’

Tails turned to Sonic. ‘I have absolutely no clue what is going on,’ he whispered, ‘but I don't like it at all. Are they having us on? Please say it's all a big joke.’

‘Okay. It's all a big joke, dude,’ replied the hedgehog, his face solemn. 'But I have a really bad feeling that this joke’s on us. I think we're in deep, deep, serious, really deep trouble right now. Look at this.’ He held out the large pebble he had picked up from the beach and turned it over. On the underside, etched into the stone in shallow grooves, were the words *Copyright © Robotnik Industries*.

‘Crikey!’ Tails exclaimed.

As if in answer, a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. The clouds were growing thicker and darker, dimming all the colours in the zone and shadowing it with greys and blacks, but as the two animals looked around they could see that the nearby hills were, in fact, brown. With a sound like a shotgun, the heavens opened and thick

rain mixed with icy hail began to pour out of the skies. The group broke and ran from the beach, sprinting for the shelter of some nearby palm trees. The trees did not look nearly as tall or healthy as Sonic remembered, but they did offer some protection from the downpour.

‘I've never seen hail in the Green Hill Zone before,’ Tails blurted, scampering up to the tree a few paces behind Sonic.

‘What do you mean? It rains and hails here all the time, you silly boy.’ It was the newcomer to the zone, Carrie, who appeared from behind the tree-trunk. 'I'm worried about you two. You've been behaving very oddly,’ she continued, sidling up to Tails and running fingers tipped with sharp claws through the white quiff of hair that stood out from his forehead. ‘Especially you, darling. Are you feeling all right?’

‘Ow! Gerroff!’ spluttered the indignant fox. ‘I'm not all right at all, I'm fed up. First Sally's nasty to me even though I won the race, then everything starts disappearing or changing, and you appear out of nowhere —’

‘I did not appear out of nowhere! I've lived here for ages, and we've been engaged to be married for simply yonks now!’ exclaimed the coypu. ‘Are you sure you're not feverish, my sugar plumpkin?’ Sonic caught one glimpse of the fox's startled expression, decided that discretion was the better part of valour and ducked down onto his knees. There was something he wanted to check.

The ground at the base of the tree was soft from the rainwater that was dripping through the leaves overhead. Carrie was having a battle keeping hold of Tails as he wriggled in her muscular arms, and every so often moved her feet to keep her balance. Sonic looked down at the impressions she had left in the muddy ground. There, as he suspected, was a reversed copyright © symbol

imprinted in the earth. There must be a mark like that on the bottom of her foot! That meant that somebody had made her, or at least was claiming they had made her, and on planet Mobius there was only one villain villainous enough to think they could get away with that.

‘Robotnik!’ yelled Sonic to the unheeding air. ‘What have you done this time, you heinous fiend? I'll get you! Me and Tails will track your mangy hide down to the farthest corner of —’

‘Tails,’ Carrie interrupted, ‘is going nowhere until he's had a nice hot bath. And I'll thank you to remember that his name is Miles Prower, and it's only his nasty common friends who call him Tails. It's not nice to make fun of someone just because they're different to you. And another thing, you so-called hero, I will not have you taking my beloved fiancé gallivanting off on another of those stupid adventures of yours. He might catch his death of cold.’

Sonic did his best to ignore this, and peered out into the cold rain. It seemed to be easing a little, judging by the size of the splashes on the surface of the lake. As he watched the watery surface, something huge, black and scaly rose to the surface, thrashed there for a moment and sank back into the depths.

‘Scratch escape route one,’ he muttered to himself. Things were looking worse and worse by the moment, and he knew that something had to be done as soon as possible before they got unbearably bad. Right now it looked as though Tails had got his hands full, or rather Carrie had got her hands full of Tails, and he would have to go it alone. ‘Catch you later, dude!’ he shouted, and sprinted off into the storm.

The heavy rain pelted down on him, slicking his spikes back against his skin and making it very uncomfortable to run. What made it worse was that he had no real idea

which direction he was supposed to be running. All he knew was that he wanted to find Robotnik as soon as possible, destroy the evil machines he was using to cause all this insanity, get things back to normal and then go and finish the picnic which had mysteriously disappeared only a few minutes ago.

In the distance, against the dark sky, Sonic caught a glimpse of a strange green light. He put on an extra burst of speed, his red shoes slipping slightly on the mud which plastered the side of the hill he was speeding up. He was soon at the top, where he paused, trying to ignore the shocking state of his trainers, and looked around. The green light seemed to be coming from a small opening in the cliff face, halfway down the hill. Sonic jumped his way down: the rocks were a little slippery with rainwater but he was as sure-footed as a goat in mountain boots, and within moments was inside.

The cave was warm and dry, curving back into the hillside. Deep inside it, something was making a humming, pulsing noise, almost like a heartbeat, and the light was stronger back there. Sonic ventured in, feeling his way along the stone wall, towards the source of the light and sound. Just as it was becoming quite painful on his eyes, he turned to a corner to see — nothing. There was a huge circle of green light, suspended in the middle of the cave, and in the middle was absolutely nothing; not an empty space, but even less than that. It looked grey and flat, except that it seemed to recede back into the distance, further than Sonic could see. Weird to the max!

A hand touched his shoulder and he whirled round, to see a strange spiky shape, not unlike himself. ‘Hey who are you?’ he asked. ‘What is this place? And what on Mobius —’ pointing at the circle of nothingness ‘— is that?’

The figure stepped out of the shadows. 'The name's Eric, Eric the Echidna. I'm something of a hero in these parts. Perhaps you've heard of me?' He was covered in dark spines, almost like a hedgehog, except that his nose was much longer and more pointed. From time to time a long tongue flickered out of his mouth to play over his lips. Sonic felt very suspicious. He could not say exactly why but his years in the hero business had taught him that working on instinct was often the best way to go. Besides, this spiny impostor was nowhere near as cool as he was. The hedgehog stepped back a pace, away from the echidna and towards the circle of nothingness.

‘Pleased to meet you, dude — I think,’ he said. ‘Okay if I just take a look at your right foot? Security check.’

‘No problemski — *dude*,’ replied Eric. His foot lashed out with astonishing speed. Sonic just had time to recognise the © symbol on its underside before it caught him in the midriff and catapulted him backwards into the circle of grey nothingness.

The surprised hedgehog felt himself sucked towards and into the vacuum in space and time. For a moment he clung to the edge of the nothingness, his fingers desperately trying to get a grip on the green light that flickered around it, and then the grey void surrounded him completely and he was gone.

Far away, sitting in his Egg-o-Matic, a certain bald mad scientist with an orange moustache stared at the screen in front of him. On it was a picture of the cave, with the patch of nothingness swirling in the centre. As he watched, the spiny figure of the echidna strode into the middle of the screen and looked up at where the camera must be fixed.

‘No problemski, doc,’ reported the figure on the screen. ‘That Sonic was a push-over, a real wuss. He's gone for good.’

‘Good! Good!’ exclaimed the scientist. ‘You have done tremendously well, my lookalike friend. Ha ha! Now, with that pestilent pest removed from Mobius, and with my chronology resculpting well underway, I am almost ready to take my proper place once more — as the ruler of all Mobius! Aha ha ha ha! You know what they say — he who laughs longest, laughs last! And thanks to you, Eric, I have plenty to laugh about! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!’

The lunatic's mocking laughter rang out, on and on, until it seemed as if it would never stop. Without a hero to save the planet Mobius, perhaps it never would.

2
YESTERDAY IS HERE AGAIN

‘AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH, dude!’ screamed Sonic as he plunged through the greyness which surrounded him on all sides. He could not tell how long he had been falling; it could have been a few seconds, or hours and hours. He could not tell if he was floating or falling, or even if he was moving at all. The only three things he knew for certain, because he had tried them all, was that there was nothing solid around him, that the greyness seemed to go on forever, and that nobody replied when he shouted.

Once he had got used to it, though, the greyness wasn't too unpleasant. It did not smell or taste of anything, like smoke would have done; it was not too bright or too dark to see comfortably, and it was not too hot or cold either, because it did not seem to have a temperature at all. In fact, it did not seem to have much of anything. Sonic was dimly aware that he was not breathing, but that was okay because for some reason he did not feel as if he needed to. All in all, this grey place was really quite relaxing.

‘Time to switch on the mental calculator, and see if I can put two and two together,’ mused the hedgehog as the endless nothingness swirled around him. ‘Now what exactly happened in the Green Hill Zone? Gotta remember exactly, in case I miss a clue.

‘First, I find that weird gizmo stuck in the ground.’ He felt in his back pocket, and was vaguely surprised to find that the mossy metal object was still there. He studied it closely but there was no sign of who might have made it.

The only mark on it, apart from the mosses, lichen, a few scratches and a dent where he had tripped over it, was a small dial with a button in the middle of it. The dial had rusted over and did not move, and nothing happened when he pushed the button. ‘Okay,’ he mused. ‘No copyright sign means it's probably not one of Robotnik's toys. He loves to put his sticky fingermarks on everything he touches. So this thing is from, like, somewhere else.

‘Next up, Tails beats me in a race. Well, it was going to happen someday. I can ignore that. Then Porker Lewis suddenly disappears, and gets replaced by that Carrie, who was something to do with Robotnik because she had his copyright sign on her foot. Tails and I are the only ones who notice that something's wrong, specially when the rest of the Zone starts to change. The others seemed to think that it had always been like that — foul and horrible and polluted, with unbodacious things in the lake.’ He shivered at the thought.

‘That means either something had suddenly taken over their minds, which doesn't explain why it didn't happen to Tails and me, and doesn't explain where Carrie came from — or that Eric person. He had Robotnik's copyright mark on him too, and so did that stone. If all the stones had been changed like that, it's got to be more than just mind control. But if the others remembered the zone always being that way, then maybe it always was like that. Maybe I just remember it differently for some reason. Was Porker Lewis really a figment of my ultimately cool imagination? Or maybe, maybe two histories, two different timelines came together and got mixed up, to make one new one? Is that possible? I think — I think my brain hurts. Whoah! Heads up!’

A point of red light had appeared ahead of him in the greyness. It was impossible to tell how far away it was, but it was zooming towards him at a colossal speed. As it

hurtled closer, Sonic could see it was a circle, and on the other side looked like somewhere in the real world. He braced himself, rolling into a spiky blue ball, and the circle of red light rushed to meet him. There was a sort of sucking pop, and he felt himself flung through, out of the nothingness and back into — well, somethingness. He bounced twice, rolled a little way, and suddenly realised his lungs felt as though they were burning up. Taking a breath of cool air, he unrolled and stood up.

Sonic was standing in a white corridor that seemed to stretch off into the far distance in either direction, illuminated by neon lights in the ceiling that cast a flat, white light over the whole area. Every few metres along the corridor there were doorways or other corridors leading off at right angles. It looked very uniform and bleak, except for a large dark smudge on the walls and floor a few metres down the corridor. Sonic trotted over to it. Bits of metal and burnt plastic still littered the floor around the smear, and there was a bitter odour in the air. Sonic sniffed it.

‘Hmmmm,’ he mused. ‘Melted plastic.’ His head jerked up as he heard a noise from one of the adjoining corridors, and he scurried to a doorway, hiding in its shallow recess. He watched as a group of figures, perhaps seven or eight of them, appeared from around a corner. They were of all shapes and sizes, but all wore tight-fitting uniforms made of a slick black substance that did not crease or wrinkle as they moved, and black helmets with mirrored silver face-plates that covered their whole heads.

Two of the figures immediately threw themselves down on the floor, one facing in each direction down the corridor. They brandished large guns of a type that Sonic had never seen before and sighted down the barrels, ready to fire at anything that moved. Sonic shrank back into the

doorway, making himself as inconspicuous as a cool blue hedgehog could be under the circumstances.

A single, much larger figure strode into the corridor and looked around. Sonic peered around the edge of the door as it lifted the face-plate on its helmet, exposing a sleek green face with big golden eyes, each with a pupil that was just a single slit, and a wide mouth filled with jagged teeth.

‘Hmm,’ mused the figure. A lithe tongue slipped from its mouth and flickered in the air, as if tasting it. Sonic caught a glimpse of curved fangs in the creature's mouth.

It's a snake, he thought, but I don't understand how a snake can stand upright in a suit like that, or why it's got arms and legs. As it turned round, he could see that it had two projections on its back that stood up stiffly under the tight shiny uniform.

The snake-thing turned to one of the others. ‘Report back to HQ. Tell them sector 12XU is clear of defenders and we can proceed. We should be inside the greater circle by midnight.’

One of the others pulled a miniature radio out of a concealed pocket, extended its aerial, flipped up his faceplate and started speaking into it. Sonic tried to get a look at the creature's face but could not quite see what was going on. He leaned slightly further out of the doorway.

‘Intruder! Don't move!’ shouted one of the soldiers lying on the floor. Sonic ducked back into the doorway, as a flickering beam of black light shot past, millimetres from his nose, and struck the light on the ceiling. It exploded with a flash, plunging that section of the corridor into darkness and showering the area with small fragments of broken plastic. Sonic dived out of the doorway and took off running, heading away from the group of strange figures.

More beams of black light exploded around him, blasting chunks of concrete out of the corridor walls. From behind him he heard the voice of the snake-like commander.

‘Stop firing. Stop firing, you idiots! That wasn't one of the enemy! It could have been one of our advance troops!’

Sonic dived around a corner into another corridor and screeched to a stop. The words gave him an idea. He had no idea where he was or who those people were, except that they seemed rather trigger-happy, and he needed to find out fast if he was going to get home in time to set Mobius to rights and defeat Robotnik's latest plan.

‘Don't shoot, dudes! I'm on your side!’ he yelled and emerged from around the corner of the corridor, his paws in the air. The squad of black-uniformed soldiers swivelled to face him, weapons pointed at his head. Sonic gulped, not sure that he had done the right thing.

‘Who are you?’ the leader demanded. ‘You're not one of the Organisers, that's for certain, but I've never seen a creature like you before.’

Sonic thought fast. ‘I'm an advance scout, dude — I mean, sir,’ he bluffed. ‘I've been checking ahead for Organiser traps.’ He had no idea what an Organiser was. but he could tell that the black suits did not like them. The snaky figure smiled, exposing a mouthful of long, thin and pointed teeth.

‘Of course. Report, then. Where are the enemy strongholds located?’ it asked.

‘Urn — they're mobile. They get around a lot. But you can expect ambushes in sectors — urn — FS5, TV21 and BPM140,’ the hedgehog improvised.

The snake peered at him through suspicious eyes. ‘Are you sure?’ he hissed. ‘BPM140 is in the Techno Zone.’

Sonic shrugged. ‘Just telling you what I heard, scaly dude sir.’

‘In that case, you had better report your findings direct to HQ.’ Sonic was about to rush off, glad to get away from this sinister troupe, but the snake creature put one hand on his shoulder. ‘Just a second, young scout. You are out of uniform. Other troops might make the same mistake we did and shoot at you as well. Put this on.’ From a pocket somewhere on its shiny uniform, it produced what looked like a flat circle of black plastic about thirty centimetres in diameter, and handed it to Sonic. The hedgehog stared at it, unsure of what to do.

‘What do I do with this?’ he asked. Every soldier in the group turned to stare at him. ‘I've — I've been scouting a long time,’ he lied quickly. ‘Undercover. This must be new equipment.’ He looked up to meet the huge snake-being's cold eyes. Their gaze held his and for a second he felt very small and very alone, before he remembered that, being Sonic the Hedgehog, he was cooler than anyone else here, and being afraid was a seriously uncool thing to do.

‘Put it on the floor,’ the snake-thing hissed. Sonic obeyed. ‘Now step on it.’

For a second nothing happened, and then the black substance of the circle began to ooze and flow around his feet, first covering his shoes, then climbing up his legs and over his body, coating it all in a thin layer of a shiny black material that felt like rubber or leather to the touch. It was a very snug, warm fit against his skin. The ooze crept higher until it reached his neck, where it stopped. Sonic moved an arm. The suit was slightly tight against his skin, but he was sure that he could move and run in it without difficulty.

‘Cool! Now I look like you dudes. Do I get a helmet as well?’ he asked.

The commander stared down at him. ‘No,’ he said coldly. ‘Suit — restrain this creature!’

There was a faint hiss and the black uniform froze solid around Sonic, fixing his limbs in the position they were in at that moment. Suddenly the suit was not comfortable at all. Sonic twisted his head to look at the snake-thing.

‘What have you done?’ he asked.

‘I've trapped you inside a prison suit, you fool,’ said the snake creature, with what might have been a smile. ‘You will remain here. The second wave of our invasion will contain members of the Torment Squad. They will take you to their torture chamber, where they will do nasty things to you with whips and pokers and icky substances until you tell them who you really are, why you are here and everything you know about the Organisers. Of course, even if you tell them, they may not stop torturing you. You know what the Torment Squad are like.’

‘But I'm an advance scout! Honest injun!’ pleaded Sonic.

‘You're nothing of the kind, and we have wasted enough time on you already. Squad: reform and advance!’ In a few seconds the creatures had regrouped and were disappearing around the corner, guns at the ready. The snake-thing turned back for a final glance in Sonic's direction.

‘Tell the Torment Squad that you were captured by Arctur the dragonkin,’ he said, and disappeared. Sonic watched them go with a mixture of relief and dismay. He was completely trapped by the suit. Straining with all his might, he tried to move his right arm, but nothing happened. It was as if his body had been set in concrete.

‘Suit — release me,’ he demanded. Nothing happened. It must be the wrong word, he thought. ‘Suit — let me go. Suit — go away, scat. Go on, be a nice suit dude and take a powder.’ Nothing seemed to work. He twisted his head around, and felt himself rock slightly. That might do it. He began to amplify the rocking movement by swaying his body forwards, then backwards. Perhaps the suit only worked in an upright position.

With a final sway, he felt himself begin to topple over backwards. ‘BOGUS!’ he yelled, and landed on his back with a solid bump. The suit had stopped moving, but did not seem any less inflexible. He was stuck. What was worse, he could hear footsteps coming down from one of the corridors. He tried to twist his head to look in that direction, but his neck would not bend far enough.

‘Halt! Don't move!’ came a voice from above him, followed by the sound of a gun being cocked.

Several choice phrases came to Sonic's mind, but he decided to be polite until he knew more about the newcomer. Its voice had sounded a little familiar. ‘I can't move, prisoner-taking dude,’ he said.

‘Yikes. What a downer.’ A furry face peered down at him. ‘Sonic!’

‘Tails! What are you doing here?’

‘After you left, that Carrie came over all strange — stranger than she was already — carted me off to this cave I'd never seen before and threw me into a circle of grey stuff. I landed on some creature dressed up like you, only it had a gun and a horn on its face. It didn't look very friendly but I'd knocked it out, so I took its gun and here I am. Why don't you get up?’

‘Because I can't move! The suit's holding me stiff. Some dragonkin guy said "Suit, restrain that impossibly

cool dude there!" and it did.’

‘Why didn't you say: "Suit, unrestrain that imposs —"? Hey, what's happening?’ At Tails's words the suit had released Sonic from its grip and was shrinking back down his body. In seconds it was a flat black circle on the floor again. Sonic picked it up, rolled it into a tube and put it in his pocket.

‘It must need someone else to say it,’ he said. ‘Come on, let's go.’

‘Which way?’ Tails asked, looking around him.

‘Well, that dragonkin guy went this way. Let's go and see if we can find the dudes he was going to fight. I think we should have a chat with these Organiser guys.’

The two heroes set off down the corridor. It turned a corner into another corridor, which was crossed by another. They turned left and came to a junction, where three other corridors joined it. They all looked just like each other.

‘Aren't there anything but blinking corridors here?’ complained Tails.

‘Don't panic, little dude,’ Sonic replied. He had spotted some stairs. The pair went up two flights and found themselves in another corridor. It went straight on for quite a while, then turned left into a large circular chamber. It was completely empty, but nineteen other corridors led off from it in different directions.

‘Oh, great!’ Tails exclaimed. ‘More corridors! We'll never get home now.’

‘Shhh,’ Sonic shushed. ‘Did you hear anything?’

‘Nothing! We're completely alone, stuck here and —’

‘SHHH!’

Tails shushed himself. From down one of the corridors, they could just hear a faint voice. ‘Help!’ it cried. ‘Help, help!’

‘Who are you?’ shouted Sonic.

‘Help help help!’ came the voice.

Sonic looked at Tails. ‘Either there are six of them, or it's one dude with a one-track mind,’ he said.

‘We ought to go and help,’ Tails replied. ‘I think it's coming from the fourteenth corridor.’ He set off, Sonic right behind him. After two turns, three junctions and a short flight of steps, they finally reached their objective. Ahead of them stood two figures, both up to their necks in shiny black suits.

‘Are you the Torment Squad?’ one of them asked in a quavering voice.

‘No way!’ exclaimed Sonic. ‘We're the Heroic Rescue Squad. Now don't move. Tails, aim your gun at them in case they do. Suits — unrestrain these helpless chumps.’ The black patches slithered back into circles on the floor and the two people flexed their stiff limbs. Sonic and Tails looked at them in astonishment. The two figures in front them both wore long coats; one grey, one orange. Both also had all sorts of devices, gadgets and oddments sprouting from their many pockets, but what had startled Sonic and Tails so much were their faces. The two friends had only ever seen one human being before and had spent most of their lives fighting him and his plans. Now they were confronted with two more individuals of the same species. Tails was the first to leap to the obvious conclusion.

‘Stay back!’ he yelled, brandishing his gun. ‘You're bad guys! I warn you, I'm a real pacman with this gun!’

‘You mean “marksman”,’ Sonic corrected. ‘And you're not.’ He turned to the two figures, who by now were cowering against the wall of the corridor. ‘Who are you two?’

‘I'm — I'm Agent Grey, and this is my friend, Agent Orange,’ the first replied. ‘We're —’

‘Don't tell them!’ interrupted the other. ‘If they're mythos creatures, they'll kill us as soon as they discover we're Organisers! Oops.’

‘So you're the Organisers we've heard so much about.’ Sonic looked them up and down. ‘You don't look so tough to me.’

‘We're not! Honestly! We're from the Science Division. We're real softies. Total weaklings. We can't possibly fight you,’ quavered the first Organiser, Agent Grey.

‘We don't want to fight,’ stated Sonic. ‘Just tell us what we want to know and we'll leave you alone. How do we get out of here, and back to the Green Hill Zone?’

‘Out?’ asked Agent Grey.

‘Green Hill Zone?’ added Agent Orange. ‘I don't understand.’

‘Planet Mobius?’ Sonic prompted. The two scientists shook their heads, obviously mystified. ‘Look, where exactly are we?’

‘Ah, I've got it: you're dimensional travellers,’ Agent Grey said, her face softening into a smile. ‘How did you get here?’

‘Through some sort of grey nothingness,’ said Sonic.

Agent Grey nodded. ‘Ah; she repeated. ‘The scenic route.’

‘What happens here?’ asked a baffled Tails.

Agent Orange looked at Agent Grey. ‘Shall I do it?’ he asked. Grey nodded again, and Orange launched into an obviously prepared speech. “Welcome to the Fourth Dimension”,’ he said. ‘ “This scenic resort is the home of the Organisers, cosmic warriors whose mission and work is dedicated to the policing of the time-streams and parallel universes, making sure that reality is not altered, and ensuring that the Laws of Physics remain unbroken. They fight an unceasing battle against Tyranny, Chaos and the destruction of Life As We Know It.” ’

‘Or at least we did,’ he added, ‘until the mythos creatures invaded.’

‘Mythos creatures?’ asked Tails.

‘You mean you're not them? Oh, thank goodness,’ interrupted Grey. Orange glared at her, but let her carry on. ‘Our job,’ she explained, is basically to make sure that nothing goes wrong with history, and that nobody starts fiddling about with it. It's a real nightmare. You have no idea how often some gonzo with ideas of universal domination invents a time machine and goes gallivanting off into the past. First they kill their own grandfather, then they tread on a butterfly and before you know where you are, history has split itself into hundreds of thousands of possible futures, like some huge piece of rope that's become unravelled at one end, and it's our job to weave them all back together. Or, if possible, to stop them unravelling before they ever start. It's hard work, I can tell you.’

‘Mythos creatures?’ Sonic prompted.

‘I was just coming to them. Mythos creatures are all the beings and animals that might have existed, but didn't — you know, like unicorns and centaurs and fairies, two-headed dogs, mermaids, orcs, elves, yeti, giant squid,

sphinxes, eight-legged goats, the great bungo of Thrubb —’

‘Dragonkin?’ asked Sonic.

‘Dragonkin, exactly. They shouldn't exist, so it's our job to keep them out of the time-streams. Of course, they're not too happy about that, and once they managed to find this place, they invaded. They're a stroppy lot and it's been murder trying to keep them out, as well as keeping up our time-monitoring duties. They've never got this far into our levels before, even if that was just an advance party.’

Tails nudged Sonic. ‘How can you be invaded by something that doesn't exist?’ he whispered. Sonic shook his head, but Grey had overheard.

‘The Fourth Dimension is completely outside the normal universe,’ she said. ‘Lots of weird stuff is possible here,’ she said. ‘Stuff you wouldn't believe. That's our job as members of the Science Division: working out new and exciting ways for the Organiser Time Police to defy the normal boundaries of reality, so they can do their jobs better.’

Tails shook his head sadly. ‘ “Outside the normal universe”,’ he repeated. ‘We'll never be home in time for tea now.’

Sonic, however, had pricked up his small blue ears at the agent's description. ‘Weird stuff, eh?’ he said. ‘Could you dudes take a gander at this baby and tell me what it might be?’ He pulled the moss-encrusted metal device from his back pocket and showed it to the two scientists. They looked at it for a long moment, then Grey looked at Orange, and Orange looked at Grey.

‘Oh dear,’ said Grey.

‘Oh bother,’ said Orange.

‘Someone's for the high jump,’ said Grey.

‘Let's hope it isn't us,’ said Orange.

‘Look, dudes, what's going down?’ Sonic asked, mystified.

‘It's a time machine,’ said Grey.

‘A new Organiser time machine,’ said Orange.

‘The Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne prototype, to be exact,’ said Grey.

‘The only one of its type,’ said Orange.

‘Orange designed it,’ said Grey.

‘Is that serious?’ asked Tails.

‘Serious?’ Orange screeched. ‘*Serious?* It could mean the end of my job. It could mean me and my family losing our home and being turned out into the corridor. And it could mean the end of the universe as we know it! Come on. We've got to tell the Science Council.’

3
JUDGEMENT OF THE SCIENCE DUDES

The two scientists set quite a pace as they headed off down the corridor, the long hems of their coloured coats flapping at their heels. Sonic and Tails shot a puzzled look at each other and set off after them.

‘I hope that this journey isn't going to be as tedious as the last one,’ muttered Tails.

‘You mean the long one through the grey stuff, or the long one through the corridors?’ asked Sonic.

‘Either. Or both,’ the fox replied.

Orange stopped outside a door and pressed a small button on the wall. ‘Don't worry, it won't be. Behold!’

‘Behold what, science dude?’ asked Sonic. ‘A teleporter? A righteously futuristic jet-car?’

‘The elevator,’ said Grey as the door slid open. The four figures crowded inside the small cubicle, Grey pressed another button and the lift shot upwards.

‘Are we going to the surface?’ asked Tails.

‘The what?’ asked Orange.

‘The surface. The top layer. The roof. Whatever's above the corridors, dude,’ explained Sonic. The two scientists looked at him, clearly clueless.

‘I don't understand,’ said Orange. ‘There is nothing beyond the corridors. The corridors are all there is. They just go on and on.’

‘What, forever?’ asked Tails.

‘Yes.’

‘In all directions?’

‘Yes.’

‘But that's impossible!’

‘Impossible where you come from,’ said Grey, ‘but this is the Fourth Dimension. Strange stuff happens here. Do not adjust your set.’

Sonic leaned over to Tails. ‘I dunno about strange stuff, dude,’ he whispered, ‘but strange people happen here too.’ Grey glared at him for a second, about to say something, but just then the lift began to slow down.

‘We're here,’ Orange announced as the door slid open, and they stepped out into a large area filled with milling people. Almost everybody here was a human, and they all looked much like Grey and Orange, except that the coats they wore were different colours. Some of the colours were so strange that they did not have any names. Most of the figures in the room were carrying something: anything from a clipboard to computer chips so large that they looked like overgrown centipedes, robot arms and legs, and weird devices not unlike the time machine which Sonic had found and which Agent Grey now clutched to her chest. It looked like a convention of mad scientists and Sonic and Tails, whose experience of human beings was rather limited, were beginning to wonder if perhaps all humans were like this.

Agents Grey and Orange pushed ahead into the scrum, elbowing their colleagues out of the way. The two pals followed them as best they could. After a few yards they reached a large, crescent-shaped desk next to a pair of double doors marked ‘SCIENCE COUNCIL CHAMBER’ in big, important letters. A large red light was on over the doors. As they watched, a man in a bright green coat

barged through the doors from the room beyond, carrying something that looked like a vacuum cleaner with legs, and muttering under his breath. The light above the door flashed to green, and a voice said: ‘Twenty-three’. Another scientist, this one with a very long white beard which had become tangled up in the confusion of wires and components that he held in his arms, staggered towards the door and carefully pushed his way through. The light flashed red again.

‘Name, please,’ a female voice demanded. Sonic and Tails looked up at a woman in a silver coat who sat behind the desk and peered down at them from under an extraordinary hairstyle.

‘Agents Grey and Orange, with — who are you two?’ asked Grey.

‘Sonic,’ Tails said.

‘And Tails,’ finished Sonic, ‘but not in that order.’

‘Your business with the Science Council?’

‘Theft of prototypes, unlicensed inter-dimensional travel and the mythos invasion,’ said Orange. ‘Priority A1 Alpha maximum.’

‘Wow!’ breathed Tails. ‘I didn't realise we were that important.’

Grey bent down towards him. ‘Everything is priority A1 Alpha maximum around here,’ she said quietly. ‘If it's not, you're automatically at the end of the queue — and you can see what the queue is like.’

Tails looked around at the huge throng of scientists, and nodded. ‘But what do you do if it's a real emergency?’ he asked.

‘You just have to wait your turn,’ Grey said.

The woman behind the desk looked over at them. ‘You have been entered in the queue,’ she said. ‘The next number is twenty-four. Your number is four thousand, eight hundred and nine. Please wait until your number is called.’ She passed Sonic a small piece of paper. It read ‘4809’.

Sonic's eyes almost bugged out of his head in surprise. ‘But this is a major-league emergency!’ he exclaimed. ‘we gotta see those boffins now!’

‘Please wait until your number is called,’ repeated the woman, and turned away to give her attention to another group of technicolour scientists who had arrived at her desk and were clamouring for their numbers. The group of four friends moved away, into the throng.

‘What are we going to do?’ asked Tails. ‘If we wait that long, we'll be here forever.’

‘Or at least until it's too heinously late to do anything,’ said Sonic. ‘Hey — ideasville! If this gizmo is a time machine, OK, can't we zip forward through time to the moment just before they call our number?’

‘Nice idea,’ said Orange.

‘Will it work?’

‘No. Time machines don't work in the Fourth Dimension. Besides, this one's broken.’

‘Bother,’ said Tails. They stood in silence for a moment, then Sonic reached over and took the broken time machine from Agent Grey.

‘I don't get one thing,’ he said. ‘Someone stole your time machine. Okay, that's a big deal. But I found it, and here it is. You've got it back, broken or not. What's the problem?’

‘Ah,’ said Agent Orange. ‘It's not as simple as that. You see, stealing a time machine is not like stealing, say, a spacecraft or a trans-subspace field oscillator. If that gets stolen, it's gone. If someone returns it, it's back. No problems, no worries.’

‘I'd be worried if someone stole my trans-subspace field oscillator,’ interrupted Agent Grey. ‘How would I get to work on time?’

‘Work with me, would you?’ said Orange. ‘The point is, suppose you steal a time machine from me now. You go off and do loads of really nasty stuff in time with it, for as long as you want. Then you come back in time to now, say two seconds after you stole the time machine, and give it back to me. I don't notice, because for me, it's only been gone for two seconds.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Sonic, nodding. ‘You mean that between the time that this Markzero thingie was stolen and the time I found it, whoever stole it could have been doing anything they wanted with it, for as long as they wanted, because they can move backwards and forwards in time with it. They could even be using it right now, but later on they go back in time and break it and leave it in the Green Hill Zone —’

‘You've got it,’ said Orange.

‘No, someone else has got it. That's the problem,’ said Sonic. ‘And I think I have a good idea who.’ The recent happenings in the Green Hill Zone were beginning to make some sort of sense. ‘Say — if someone had a time machine like this, how would they make someone, say a little piggy someone, disappear?’

‘Nothing easier,’ said Grey. ‘You go back a few years in time and make sure that Mr Piggy and Mrs Piggy never meet each other, so Little Piggy never gets born. They

don't just disappear, they never existed at all. You can make people appear in the same way; introducing two people who then fall in love, but who wouldn't normally have ever met at all.’

‘Spooky!’ Tails exclaimed, looking rather worried.

‘Don't you worry, little furry fellow,’ said Orange, patting the fox on the head. ‘That's the sort of thing the Organisers exist to stop.’

‘Except you were a bit slow off the mark with this one, and our cool little planet may get trashed as a result. These are drastic times, dudes,’ said Sonic. His expression was serious. ‘Drastic times call for drastic actions, and I am most definitely a Hedgehog of Drastic Action. Follow me!’

‘Sonic! What are you going to do?’ Orange demanded, but the blue hedgehog was already dashing towards the double doors. The light over them was flashing a bright red.

‘Gangway!’ yelled Sonic. The flock of startled scientists took one glance at the speeding blue streak that was heading their way and parted. Sonic sprinted ahead and at the last moment leaped into the air, spinning like a blue cannonball. He hit the doors with a tremendous thud and they burst open, flying off their hinges into the room beyond. Sonic flew on, into the room, and landed perfectly on his feet beside the bearded scientist, who was giving some kind of speech and did not seem to have noticed the interruption.

‘My prototype differs from the PM-801 by the addition of a special biological blue-whitener —’ he burbled. Sonic tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Sorry, boring dude. Emergency reassignment. Here's your new number,’ he said, passing the elderly

technologist the piece of paper with ‘4809’ on it. ‘Please rejoin the queue and wait for your number to be called.’ The old man looked puzzled, but took the paper and picked up his tangle of wires and coils, and walked towards the smashed remains of the double doors, passing Tails who, with Agents Orange and Grey, was just entering the room.

Sonic paused and looked around. He was standing in the middle of a large, brightly lit circular dais in the centre of an enormous room, filled with tiers of desks that stretched back into the shadows, many rows deep. Every desk was occupied by someone or something, and they all wore long gold or silver coats. Most of them were human, or looked like they were mostly human. Some definitely were not. There was one being who looked like a huge furry beanbag. Another appeared to be a small tree, another was a big insect with antennae that twitched slowly in Sonic's direction. One place was occupied by a gold coat with nobody in it, but it seemed to be sitting up and watching him — Sonic guessed that there was something wearing it, only they were invisible. Other members of the Council defied description. They had too many arms, or not enough heads, or were made out of stone, or jelly, or, um, chocolate? About five of the desks had TV screens sitting on them, showing pictures of attentive faces, both human and alien.

Everybody was looking at Sonic. He cleared his throat, feeling a little nervous and unsure whether he had done the right thing.

‘Most excellent and learned science boffin council-type dudes, dudesses, dude-things and TV screens,’ he began. ‘My name is Sonic the Hedgehog and this is an emergency —’

‘This is most irregular!’ exclaimed one of the faces on one of the TV screens in the front row. ‘How dare you

barge into the Council without invitation or explanation? Young people today have no respect —’

‘Chill, cathode conk!’ Sonic shouted. ‘Someone's stolen one of your time machines!’

A deathly hush fell over the room as the members of the Science Council turned to stare at each other. ‘Is this true?’ demanded someone in a gold coat near the back of the room. Sonic was not sure, but he thought the speaker was made entirely of wickerwork.

‘It's true, respected Councillors,’ Orange confirmed, stepping forward into the circle to stand beside Sonic and taking the broken time machine from his paws. This damaged Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne prototype, developed by myself less than a week ago, was found in a place called the Green Hill Zone on the planet Mobius. Judging by the state of it, it had been there several months, if not years. We must conclude that it has been, or will be, stolen from our storeroom or laboratory, and will be used in unauthorised time violations prior to being abandoned there.’

An excited babble of conversation ran through the council chamber. A young human girl, probably not more than nine years old and wearing a large and heavily decorated gold coat that hung heavily on her small shoulders, stood up. She had short brown hair, a long, serious face and, Sonic noticed, had a large badge or medal shaped like an eight-pointed star attached to her robe. Nobody else in the room had one anything like it. In her right hand she carried a black rod with a red gem mounted on its end.

‘Has the time machine been reported stolen?’ she demanded.

A spindly silver robot in a silver cloak stood up, holding a small device in one of its four hands. ‘Checking,’

it reported. ‘Data indicates that no Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne prototype time machine is presently held in our stores, or signed out to Organiser Time Police operatives. We must conclude it has been stolen.’

‘This planet Mobius. What sort of place is it?’ asked someone else.

Sonic was about to answer when the robot councillor began reeling off statistics.

‘Planet Mobius, on reality level RE/1171 /p-b,’ it declaimed. ‘Standard E-type planet in orbit around a G2 star. Exact location is unspecified. Home of A3 status hero Sonic the Hedgehog; sidekick Miles Prower, also known as Two-Tails, also known as Tails the Fox, status B2; and the anti-hero Dr Ivo Robotnik, classified as a type A4 risk. The last-named is also the source of the planet's only significant technology, rated at level fourteen. Sorry,’ he squinted at the machine in his hands and thumped it, ‘level fifteen.’

A hairy jellyfish rose up on its tentacles at the back of the room. ‘Level fifteen should not be high enough for the development of time-travel. Possibly this Borontik person has created a device that can cross dimensions, but no more than that,’ it bubbled damply.

‘Excuse me, most awesome dudes,’ interrupted Sonic, ‘but he *can* time-travel, and the fact I'm here is proof!’ Quickly he described what had happened to Tails and himself, starting with the moment he tripped over the time machine, and ending with the moment that they were thrown into the grey area in the cave and popped out in the Fourth Dimension (but missing out the part where Tails had beaten him in the race).

‘You see, dudes,’ he finished, ‘someone's gotta be changing time and altering our history. As my planet's major hero — A3 type, was it? — I really hate to have to

ask you for help, but it's the only hope we got. Give us a time-travel machine that works, and Tails and me will zip off through time, set everything to rights, and then find Robotnik and crash his chips for him. You guys can get on with defending against that mythological invasion that's on your doorstep. Deal?'

The room was filled with a low hubbub as the members of the Science Council debated the case. After a couple of minutes, they resumed their seats and the young girl stood up again.

'Esteemed members of the Council,' she said. 'Please cast your votes for the severity of the two crises which have been placed before us for our judgement. Press your key-pads — now!'

Sonic blinked as the space around his head was suddenly filled with bright, twisting lights. He ducked down and moved back a few paces, to look at the three dimensional apparition that was floating in the air where he stood. Two lines of text rotated slowly above the ground, spelling out words made of light. 'Time machine theft: Time disruption, class three' ran the top line. 'Planet Mobius: Suspected time disruption, class five' said the other.

Sonic turned to look at Agents Grey and Orange, who were staring at the judgement as it hung in the the air. 'Is that good or bad?' he asked, but before they could reply, the young girl, who seemed to be in charge here, had stood once more.

'The judgement of the Council is as follows,' she proclaimed. 'The theft of the time machine will immediately be investigated by two members of the Organisers Time Police, aided by Agents Orange and Grey. They will report their findings to the council in thirty hours.

‘The happenings on planet Mobius are declared to be a suspected violation of the temporal laws, but cannot be proved as such.’ Sonic groaned at this, but the girl continued. ‘The hero Sonic the Hedgehog and his assistant Tails the Fox will be issued with an Organiser dimensional warper and will return to Mobius. There they will gather evidence of this suspected and any further time violations, and will return to present them before the Council as soon as is possible. Further action will be taken at that time. Now please send scientist number twenty-four into the chamber. We have business to get on with and we haven't got all day.’

Sonic and Tails turned away, looking at each other. Tails looked glum. Sonic put an arm around his shoulders.

‘Cheer up, chum,’ he said. ‘It could be worse. At least they're sending us home.’ Tails looked at him and managed a brave smile. Together they walked towards the exit after Orange and Grey. Just as they were about to leave, the thin silver robot who had spoken earlier stepped out in front of them. It still held the strange device in its hands.

‘I have to warn you,’ it said, ‘that during the vote, the computer upgraded the reports of Dr Robotnik's technology level from fifteen to sixteen. That makes him an A3 risk, which is now as good as you, Master Sonic. Be careful out there. Good luck.’

Sonic grinned. ‘That's okay. I've got Tails to help me out. We're a team. Robotnik will never defeat both of us.’

The robot looked at them both. ‘Good luck,’ it repeated. The device in its hand bleeped faintly, and it peered down at the screen. ‘That can't be right,’ it said. ‘Robotnik just went up to technology level seventeen. I've never seen any culture advance so fast, especially one that depends on just one scientist. If you want, I could tell the Council the new data and ask for a new vote.’

Thoughts raced through Sonic's mind. He had no idea what technology level seventeen actually meant, but he was certain that it was pretty bad, and worse than level fourteen. It was possible that Robotnik was now actually tougher than he was, even with Tails to help him out. On the other hand, another vote would mean another delay, another discussion and more time wasted. Besides, the Council might still decide that there was not enough proof to send some of their Time Police to Mobius. After all, they had their own problems to deal with right now.

He looked up at the robot. ‘Thanks for the excellent offer, dude,’ he said, ‘but time's wasting, and the sooner we sort out Robotnik, the sooner we can get our planet back to normal. We're heroes, you know. It's our job. We'll deal with it, and let you know if we find any more time machines. Come on, Tails. Let's go home.’

4
ARRIVAL ON *WHERE?*

The two heroes left the Science Council's chamber and strode back out into the melee of waiting scientists beyond. It was clear from their expressions that they both had a lot on their minds, so much that they almost didn't notice when Agents Grey and Orange called them over to where they stood over by the lift.

‘Sonic! Tails!’ This time the two friends heard them and trotted over. Behind them, the door of the lift slid open invitingly.

‘Come on,’ said Grey. ‘We're going to the Laboratory and Storeroom level. If you're going to pick up that dimensional warper, you'd better come with us.’ They piled into the small lift and everyone breathed in as the door slid shut behind them. Orange pressed the button, and with a lurch it hurtled downwards into the depths of the enormous network of tunnels, corridors and rooms which seemed to make up the whole of the Fourth Dimension.

After several minutes, the lift came to a stop with an abrupt lurch. The door slid open, to reveal yet another bleak expanse of corridor.

‘This way,’ said Grey, and she and Orange set off to the right. Tails followed obediently, but Sonic had seen something in the other direction. It was a large black smudge on the wall, and it looked a lot like the mark he had noticed in the corridor where he first arrived in the Fourth Dimension. ‘Hey, wait a minute you guys,’ he said, but they were already striding away down the passageway. Sonic took a last glance at the black smear, then set off after them.

When he caught up with them, they had stopped by a closed door. A sign on it announced: ‘Laboratory Storeroom 15: Access Only to Authorised Personnel’. Grey handed the time machine which she was still carrying to Orange, and started rummaging in the pockets of her long grey coat. She produced a small plastic card from her pocket and, with a flourish, pushed it into a thin slot beside the door. It went in halfway, then stuck.

‘That's funny,’ she said. ‘It's never done that before.’

Sonic peered closely at the slot. ‘There are some scratches around it,’ he said. ‘And there's something you should know about the corridor back there. I saw a black sm—’

‘Look, the door's not locked anyway,’ said Orange. He pushed it with his free hand and it swung open. Beyond, they could see a room filled with shelves, hundreds of them. There were so many that it seemed to have shelves attached to its shelves. Furthermore, every one of those shelves was piled high with gadgets, gizmos, inventions, devices, apparatuses, appliances, contraptions, prototypes, tools, raw materials, parts, spares, contrivances, gimmicks, instruments, machines, engines, implements, accessories, doohickeys, whodjamaflips, thingummibobs, whamdoodles, whatnots, whatchamacallits and a mousetrap.

‘Is anyone paying attention to me?’ Sonic asked loudly. The two scientists obviously were not. Instead they opened the door fully and walked into the room. ‘All I'm trying to say is,’ finished Sonic, ‘I think something funny's going on here.’

‘There's nothing funny in here,’ hissed a familiar sinister voice. ‘Nothing at all. Hands and paws in the air, all of you. Now.’ A large figure in a shiny black suit strode

forward ‘Aha,’ it said. ‘We meet again, small blue spy. Are you still so sure you're an advance scout?’

‘Arctur,’ said Sonic, with a weak grin. ‘How's the invasion going? I gotta tell you, dude, I've just come from these guys’ security headquarters, and boy, are they ready for you. If I was you, I'd go home right now while I'd still got the use of my legs.’

‘I doubt you'll have the use of yours for much longer. Or your head,’ sneered the scaly mythos creature, then turned to look at someone or something around the corner of the room, out of Sonic's line of sight. The hedgehog took the opportunity to bend his head close to the long pointed ears of his foxy friend.

‘Distract him for me, dude,’ he whispered. ‘I've got a plan.’

‘Is it a bodacious one?’ Tails whispered back.

‘Don't push it,’ muttered the hedgehog.

‘What was that?’ demanded Arctur, turning back to the small group.

‘It was me,’ Tails said bravely. ‘I was just mentioning to my chum that you seem very big and intimidating, considering that you're an imaginary creature.’

‘I am not imaginary!’ the dragonkin snarled. ‘That's a despicable lie perpetrated by those foul Organisers! Don't let me hear you utter that again!’ He advanced on the hapless hedgehog, drawing a black pistol from a holster as he did so.

Sonic ducked down behind Orange and Grey, out of sight for a second, and felt in his back pocket for a moment. It was still there. He pulled out the folded circle of shiny black plastic, opened it out and flicked it between Orange's legs, right where the approaching dragonkin would step.

Sonic stood up, and jumped between his buddy and the monster. Don't hurt Tails!’ he shouted. ‘If you're going to shoot anyone, like, shoot me.’

‘Sonic! What are you doing?’ exclaimed Tails.

‘Saving our bacon,’ hissed the hedgehog. To Arctur, he said, ‘Look at me, snake-features. Do I look like an Organiser to you? No. Do I look like a mythological creature? Does Tails? Come on, pal. We're talking about a righteously blue hedgehog and a fox with two tails here. You don't get much more imaginary than that. Can we join your invasion force?’ He glanced down at the floor. The black circle had disappeared.

‘No. I was going to leave you for the Torment Squad,’ the sneaky snaky soldier intoned, ‘but I think I will shoot you after all. Any last words?’

‘Oh, go on then,’ Sonic said. ‘Suit — restrain this dragonkin!’ With a faint crunching sound, the shiny black substance that had just oozed silently and invisibly up and over Arctur's shiny black uniform froze solidly around his massive body. He struggled against it, but it did not yield a millimetre.

‘What have you done to me?’ he boomed.

‘Only what you did to me, dude — just deserts,’ grinned Sonic. He picked up a piece of cloth from one of the shelves, wadded it into a large ball and, careful to mind his fingers, shoved it into the dragonkin's mouth as a gag. Arctur made a muffled angry noise through it, but was obviously stuck and silenced. Sonic turned to the others.

‘Quick, you guys,’ he said, ‘we haven't got much time and there are sure to be more of those freaky fabled foot soldiers around here somewhere. Which one of these arcane devices is a dimensional warper?’

‘This one,’ Orange said, holding out something which looked suspiciously like a telephone that had swallowed a garden fork. ‘The OR-29 dimensional transmogrifier. It has a built-in catalytic converter, does 57 dimensions to the litre at an average speed of 0.00304 hyperparsecs per hour, comes with fitted airbags as standard and —’ he pressed a button and tinny music filtered out of two small holes in the side of the contraption, ‘— is fitted with stereo speakers. It was my high-school science project. Won second prize.’ He held it out towards Tails, smiling and blushing.

The fox was about to take it from him when Grey interrupted, clutching another device which she had taken off a shelf behind her. ‘You don't want to take that!’ she spluttered. ‘You want something brand new: like this GY-911. Quad sound, 32-bit processor, self-contained nuclear-fusion power pack good for eight years or five million dimensions, teletext, split-level grill, no tricks, no unpleasant bending, fully functional and it comes with a three-year guarantee. Won first prize.’

Sonic looked from one machine to the other. ‘I'm not interested in which of your two mad contraptions makes the best toasted teacakes! We're in a hurry — just tell us which one of these two will get us to the Green Hill Zone fastest,’ he demanded.

‘Mine!’ shouted Orange.

‘No, mine!’ replied Grey. They glared at each other.

‘Do they both go through that heinous grey nothingness place?’ asked Sonic. The scientists turned to face him. ‘Yes!’ they chorused.

‘Then I don't want either of them. We need to get back faster than fastest, not drift around for ages! Got anything really speedy?’ Sonic asked.

Grey's face fell. She reached up to one of the shelves, replaced her own machine, brought down a black box with buttons on it and gave it to Sonic. It looked like the remote control for a very complex video, with a small screen at the top of it. ‘That's the Modular 08-KIT,’ she said.

‘It won't cut my toenails, program my video or make me smell nice, will it?’ asked Sonic suspiciously. Grey looked at him with disbelief in her eyes.

‘Of course not!’ she exclaimed. it's a dimensional warper. You didn't expect it to have silly gimmicks built into it, did you?’

Sonic looked at her, her expression of blank disbelief mirrored in his own face. Tails caught his eye and shrugged.

‘Er, no,’ Sonic said. ‘Now, how does this thing work?’

‘Press the Planet button, and type in the name of the planet where you want to go,’ Grey said.

Sonic started immediately. ‘M–O — this is hard! These buttons are all over the place. Hey,’ he said, looking up, ‘what was that sound?’

From outside in the corridor came the sound of marching feet. Tails looked at Sonic. ‘It must be more of those imaginary bad guys,’ he said.

‘Shhh!’ whispered Sonic. ‘They may be imaginary dudes, but their guns are way too real for me. They've probably come looking for old snake face.’ He punched in the last letters of his home planet's name, and waited a second. ‘Nothing's happening,’ he said.

‘You have to press the Zone button and type the location on the planet where you want to arrive,’ Orange hissed.

‘Sheesh! What next — baggage check? Choice of in-flight movie?’ muttered Sonic, searching for the ‘G’ key. ‘R–E–E–N–H–I–L–L–’

There was a quiet *Whump* noise.

‘Z–O–N — hey, what happened?’ The hedgehog pulled his attention away from the black box in his paws and looked for his companion. ‘Tails? Are you okay?’

‘I feel sick,’ moaned the fox, crouching down on the blackened, oil-stained earth around them. ‘This burning smell is really getting to me.’

There was a burning smell in the air, a foul stench of plastic, rubber and tar. As Sonic looked around, he could see where it was coming from. They were somewhere else. Over in the distance lay a huge pile of mangled machines and equipment, heaped together to make a huge, steep mountain of scrap. Tiny figures moved across he surface of the mountain and the lights of fires flickered inside it, occasionally blazing up to leap high into the blackened, smoke-filled sky. At the foot of the mountain lapped the edge of a huge body of black liquid that might possibly have been a lake once, but was now just a mass of pollution. Dark bubbles rose from its depths, and at its centre lay a huge rusting mass of scrap metal, as if some colossal robot had fallen into it many years ago and had been left to rot in the thick liquid. Yuck. In the distance, chimneys pumped out choking black billows of smoke and the air was filled with the deafening sounds of industry.

‘Those dumb scientists and their bogus machines!’ Sonic shouted. ‘This isn't Mobius! No way is this ever the Green Hill Zone! Not in a million years!’

Tails stood up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Ahem — I wouldn't be so sure about that,’ he said. ‘Look.’

He pushed the black 08-KIT dimensional warper into Sonic's paw. ‘PLANET MOBIUS. GREEN HILL ZONE. DESTINATION REACHED’ it read.

‘Bogus! The stupid machine's wrong,’ Sonic said. ‘It must be. The machine thinks it's sent us to the Green Hill Zone, but it's actually messed up big-time and brought us to this — this, I dunno, Burning Hot Death Zone on the planet Not Mobius or something.’

‘So explain this,’ Tails said. He bent down, picked up a stone and passed it to his friend.

‘Explain what? Like, it's a stone.’

‘Turn it over,’ instructed the fox. Sonic did. There, engraved in neat letters on the underside, were the words: *Copyright © Robotnik Industries. All rights reserved.*

‘Welcome home,’ Tails shuddered.

5
MEISTER BLASTER

An hour later, the two friends had trudged their way across half of what used to be the Green Hill Zone, which they had seen briefly as the Brown Hill Zone and which was now definitely the Blackened, Bumpy and Thoroughly Unpleasant Zone.

‘Where is everyone?’ Tails asked.

‘What?’ Sonic replied.

‘I SAID, WHERE IS EVERYONE?’ The heroes had to shout to make themselves heard above the din that filled the air.

‘I don't know,’ the hedgehog shouted back. ‘If Robotnik was messing with time, they could all have been erased. Vanished forever. Never existed.’ The thought and its implications made a shiver of fear run down his spine. It's OK for heroes to be frightened, he reminded himself, so long as they're brave at the same time. Being afraid of something because it was difficult or dangerous, but still trying it all the same, that was real heroism.

‘So how did the Zone get like this?’ Tails continued. ‘Someone must have built these machines for Robotnik. He's too lazy, and we haven't seen any of his robots yet.’

Sonic thought for a moment. ‘He could have gone back in time and built a machine whose job was to make more machines, bigger and more complicated ones. And then the new machines make even more, even bigger machines… pretty soon you'd be up to your neck in really big, really complicated machines.’

‘What would they all do?’

‘I dunno, it's only an idea,’ Sonic took a short run-up and kicked a piece of pipe that was lying on the ground. It shook with a hollow ‘Bong’ and Sonic clutched his foot in pain.

‘Even the objects here hate me!’ he protested. ‘I hate this place! Hate it! Hate hate hate!’

Tails was looking thoughtful. ‘What I really don't get,’ he said, ‘is why we didn't disappear when everything else started changing. We're Robotnik's biggest foes, so we've got to be the biggest threat to his latest plan. And what does he do? He vanishes Porker Lewis, trashes the zone and brings in a big, ugly girlfriend for me. Doesn't touch us.’

‘Yeah — ow!’ Sonic said as he gingerly lowered his injured foot to the ground. ‘That's been troubling my brainbox too. Specially the girlfriend bit. Look! Something moved!’

Tails peered through the polluted air. In the distance he could just see a figure carrying something large towards a massive machine that was pounding something into the ground at regular intervals. ‘What is it? Robot or person?’

‘Only one way to find out. Let's go,’ Sonic said. They ran off towards the machine, Sonic limping slightly. As they drew closer, Tails gave a squeak of recognition.

‘It's Johnny Lightfoot!’ he shouted back at his mentor. And he must have been eating his greens, because he's grown up really big and strong.’ Sonic was about to give him some words of warning, but Tails, still carrying the dimensional warper, had zoomed away at full speed towards the large rabbit, his twin tails lashing through the thick air to give him an extra boost of speed. Sonic gave chase as fast as he could with his injured foot, but ahead

of him he could already see his furry friend screech to a halt by the hulking figure and start talking. Sonic accelerated towards them as fast as he could.

‘Ow ow owowowowowowowow,’ he muttered as he drew close. ‘Tails, what are you doing?’ The fox and rabbit turned towards him.

‘It's not Johnny,’ Tails said, ‘but he says he's a Lightfoot clone, whatever that is.’

‘Clones are like copies, grown from the original. Like seeds. I'm a Type B,’ boomed the rabbit. It looked like their friend Johnny Lightfoot, with the same sleek grey fur coat and floppy ears with black tips, but it stood a good head and shoulders taller than either Sonic or Tails, and had bulging muscles to match. Sonic toyed with the idea of asking it to raise its foot so he could check for a copyright mark, but he could already see one on the intricate and very heavy engine that it was carrying.

‘Type B?’ asked Tails.

‘B is for big, brawny and brainless,’ the rabbit replied. ‘That's me. What are you two?’

‘I'm a fox and he's murph murble mump,’ Tails said as Sonic clamped a hasty hand over his mouth.

‘We're Lightfoot clones too, dude,’ he said. ‘A new batch, specially made. I'm a type S, for speedy, spiky, sharp and super-cool. He's a type T, for talkative two-tailed twit. We're, uh, we're looking for the boss-man. Is he around?’

The giant rabbit looked confused for a moment. ‘I think he's underground, inventing stuff.’

Sonic looked at Tails. ‘Oh, great.’

‘Munkle murf,’ agreed Tails. Sonic looked back at the big bunny. ‘Security check, dude. Where's the entrance to this underground place?’ he demanded.

‘Through the cave in the hill,’ said the rabbit, frowning. ‘Do I pass the check?’

‘Flying colours, man. Top of the class. Number one in a field of one. Just keep up the good work. Come on, type T.’ He took his hand away from Tails's mouth and the two animals watched as the rabbit lifted the massive engine it was carrying onto its shoulder and continue on its way. As soon as it was safely out of earshot, Sonic clicked his fingers.

‘The cave!’ he said. ‘Too obvious, dude. My mind must be so finely tuned that I just didn't think of something so easy.’

‘Aw no, not the cave, please,’ Tails said. ‘It's dark and scary in there.’ A thought struck him. ‘Did we have to lie to that rabbit? He was so friendly.’

‘Friendly or unfriendly, he was a clone made by Robotnik,’ Sonic said. ‘A big clone with loads of heavy-duty muscles and carrying a heavy heavy-duty thing. We tell him who we really are, he'd have pounded us to itty-bitty type S and T molecules, like, indubitably. Come on — this way.’

Two streaks of light, one blue and one orange, shot off across the landscape of the remains of the Green Hill Zone. The blue one was limping slightly and making occasional ‘Ow!’ noises. They hurtled over hillocks, through valleys, around new buildings, leaping occasional pipes and strange machines that were in their way. Finally they reached the top of one of the hills and stopped. Tails peered over the edge of the cliff on one side of it.

‘Is this the one?’ he asked.

‘I reckon so,’ Sonic said. ‘I can see the entrance halfway down, but getting to it will be tricky. It's probably okay for Robotnik because he can fly in and out in that

stupid little Egg-o-Matic thing he sits in, but Sega only knows how anyone else does it. Look at this,' he wiped one paw on the rocks of the cliff face, and it came away slick and black with grime, 'it's covered in oil and smeg. Going down's going to be slippery and tricky.'

'No problem for me,' Tails said. He fluffed up his two tails, took a firm hold of the white tip at the end of one of them, and whirled it around, above his head. It spun like a rotor, lifting up his foxy body until he hung underneath the spinning propellers of his tails, hovering like a helicopter in front of Sonic's face.

' "Talkative two-tailed twit", eh?' he smirked above the whirring sound of his tails. 'See you in the cave, fella. Slippery cliffs shouldn't be a problem for a spiky super-cool dude like you.' With a cheeky grin he angled his tails and veered away over the edge of the cliff, flying down towards the dark shape of the cave entrance below.

Sonic watched him go. He felt cheesed off; partly that Tails would leave him like that, and partly that the youngster had not given any thought to the dangers that might lie below. They already knew that Robotnik was down there, and they knew that he was much more powerful than he had ever been before. And Tails had just flown off into whatever peril might lurk there, without a thought except to put one over his elders and betters, specifically Sonic. The blue hedgehog sighed, rubbed his painful foot one last time and began to make a careful descent of the tricky cliff.

It was even more slippery than he had first suspected, and almost immediately his special red shoes, given to him by his old ally and friend Dr Ovi Kintobor, were slipping and sliding over the rocks as if someone had spread grease on them. Sonic desperately clawed for a pawhold on the rocks but white gloves are not noted for their usefulness to

mountaineers, and he could not get a firm grasp on anything. The rocks seemed smoother than the last time he had clambered down here.

Without warning there was a flash on the horizon and a loud rumble from somewhere far off in the zone. A moment later the ground trembled and shook. Small rocks broke away from the cliff and rolled their way down to the bottom. One of them bounced off Sonic's head, and he grabbed towards a convenient outcrop of stone, trying to get another pawhold. The stone came away in his hands, his feet slipped from under him and he fell, cartwheeling, down towards the base of the cliff. With a crunch that shook his body, his fingers hit the bottom lip of the cave entrance, and he hung on as if his life depended on it.

‘Yo, Tails! I need a paw!’ he shouted as quietly as he could, hoping that his voice would carry over the racket of the zone into the depths of the cave.

‘Sonic? Come and look at this, it's really interesting,’ came Tails's voice, wafting out of the cave. Sonic could feel the tips of his fingers creeping closer and closer to the edge of the rock he was clinging to. With a lurch, his right hand slipped completely off and his body swung for a second, suspended only by the four fingers of his left hand. Three fingers. Two.

‘Super dash time!’ he yelled. It was a risk, but he lived for risks. Sometimes. In one smooth movement Sonic spun his body into a smooth circle, whizzing around like a blue catherine wheel. The speed of his spinning super-dash did what his running shoes had failed to do; it caught a grip on the smooth surface and catapulted him up, through the entrance and into the cave itself. He flew through the air, bounced once on the cold stone floor and rolled to a stop at Tails's feet at the end of the cave.

‘What kept you?’ asked the fox. ‘Look, I've found this.’ He pointed to a large red button in the middle of an otherwise blank stone wall in front of them. ‘Can I press it?’

Sonic stood up, brushing dust and grit off his arms, legs and spikes. ‘This is where the grey nothingness thing was,’ he commented. ‘No sign of that spiny Eric interloper, is there? I've got a score to settle with him.’

‘No sign,’ Tails said.

‘So press the button.’

With a soft groan a large section of the stone wall slid upwards to reveal a large chamber beyond. It had a metal floor and metal walls, and was large enough to contain a large tank, or a platoon of robot soldiers. It was completely empty.

‘It's a dead end,’ Tails said.

‘I don't think so, dude,’ Sonic said, striding in. ‘It's a lift.’ The stone wall sighed back into position behind them, and with a slight judder the metal floor began to sink downwards. ‘See? I told you.’

‘Where's it taking us?’ worried Tails. ‘And what do we do if it's somewhere we don't want to go?’

Sonic turned to his buddy. ‘Chill, dude,’ he said. ‘It'll be cool; we're the main guys here. And if things turn out bad — well, we've still got that dimensional warper thing. We use it to zip back to the Fourth Dimension. No problem.’ The lift stopped with a slight shake, and the far wall slid away silently, to reveal a long, wide passageway through the heart of the living rock. Our heroes stepped out of the lift. Overhead lights flickered on ahead of them as they approached, revealing heavy metal doors set along the corridor. Stacked along the rocky walls were large chunks of machinery. Some of them were clearly useless, their sides rusted away or with sections dangling out of

them on tangles of broken and twisted wires. Others hummed and flashed to themselves, performing strange, mysterious functions.

Tails looked at Sonic. ‘Should we smash them all?’ he asked.

Sonic shook his head. ‘No way. We don't know what they are. Some of them may be traps. Some may be alarmed. Some might blow up most heinously. With Robotnik's mad machines, there's no way of telling.’ He strode ahead down the tunnel. ‘I recognise this one,’ he exclaimed, stopping by one particular contraption that lay switched off and on its side by one of the doors. ‘It's that thing that generated the grey nothing field that sent me — us — to the Fourth Dimension.’ He opened an access panel on its side, reached in and ripped out a handful of components. ‘Robotnik won't be using that again in a hurry,’ he said with grim satisfaction.

‘What's this?’ asked Tails, peering up at the door beside the machine. ‘“Clone Laboratory”? What's that mean?’

‘It's not where we're going,’ Sonic said. ‘We're after evidence that Robotnik's been messing with time, remember?’ He had a fair idea what would be in the clone lab, but the idea of tangling with other Lightfoot clones as big as the type B they had met outside, or possibly even bigger, did not appeal to him. They walked on down the long, straight tunnel.

‘“Robot Design Laboratory”,’ Tails said, reading the nameplates on each of the doors they passed. ‘“Robot Storage Area.” “Security Centre.” “Kitchenette.” “Gloating Room.” “Laboratory For Dangerous Temporal Research: Do Not Enter, Especially if You're Blue and Spiky.” Do you think that might be it, Sonic?’

‘We've arrived,’ said the hedgehog, ‘and to prove it, we're here. Do you think it would be polite to knock?’

‘Probably,’ Tails said dubiously. Sonic raised one fist high above his head and brought it crashing down on the door. With a crunch it flew backwards and landed with a slam in the middle of the room beyond.

‘Door's open,’ he said, and stepped into the laboratory. He had been in several of Robotnik's laboratories before, but never one quite like this. It was a huge circular space. The outer half of the room was taken up with several enormous tables, laden with strange equipment and surrounded by cabinets and metal shelves. The middle of the room was empty, surrounded by the tables, and Sonic was reminded of some kind of theatre, or the Science Council chamber in the Fourth Dimension, or the sort of arena where gladiators fought to the death in tacky videos. The ceiling and floor were covered in gleaming white tiles. A metal door led off from it, and Sonic guessed it probably led to the Robot Storage Area next door.

Tails sniffed the air. ‘Pooh. Scrambled egg sandwiches.’

‘This is Robotnik's place all right,’ Sonic said. ‘Let's get hunting.’ He jumped up onto the nearest table and began to sort through the masses of equipment, files, diagrams and papers that lay there.

‘What are we looking for?’ asked Tails.

‘Something like this.’ The hedgehog brandished a large piece of paper he had already found. ‘Listen to this: “My plan for conquering the planet Mobius and — ha ha ha! — all of time”.’

‘ “Ha ha ha”?’ repeated Tails.

‘That's what it says, dude. “Start with the Green Hill Zone. Use the time device to remove or modify the — ha

ha ha! — unwanted elements, beginning in the recent past. Some elements may prove to be more resilient to change than others, and may require deep time penetration to be neutralised. For example, the pesky pair of hoodlum heroes.” Hey, that's us! Well, he hasn't got us yet.’

‘No way!’ Tails said. ‘We're much too smart. Besides, how would he know we were here?’

Sonic looked up to the middle of the ceiling, above the open area of the room, where a movement had caught his eye. A small video camera hung there, and as he watched, it turned to fix him with its glassy stare. ‘I think he knows, dude,’ he said, not taking his eyes off the camera. Was it on an automatic control, or was somebody watching at the other end? Were silent alarms going off throughout the underground complex?

‘Not!’ exclaimed Tails. With his back turned to Sonic, he opened one of the cabinets on the wall and an avalanche of gadgetry poured out onto the floor with a clatter that filled the room, echoing from its walls. ‘There's no way Robotnik, knows we escaped from the Fourth Dimension. Besides, continued the fox, ‘what would he do if he did find we were here? I'll tell you. He'd come flying in here in that potty little Egg-o-Matic with some daft little weapon mounted under-neath it, and he'd laugh a lot and wiggle his moustache at us, and we'd just do Spin Attacks on him until his pathetic new device blew up and fell apart and he flew off in a huff. That's what would happen. Hey, what's that shaking?’

Sonic could feel it too. The table he was standing on was vibrating alarmingly under his feet. Small electronic components and screws fell to the floor and rattled against the white tiles. Faintly he could hear a high-pitched whining sound. It seemed to be coming from the ceiling above the open area of the room. As he looked up, a small

trickle of white dust drifted down from above him. Through it he could see a small black semicircle carving a large circle across the white ceiling tiles. Tails, who had found something interesting in the pile of junk on the floor, did not seem to have noticed.

‘Under the tables! Now!’ Sonic shouted and dived for cover, just as a huge chunk of the roof collapsed into the room with a crash that sent pieces of tiles and plaster skittering across the floor. He heard Tails yelp in alarm. There was a clatter of metal as the fox dropped something, and then another, louder yelp.

Sonic looked out. Down through the hole in the ceiling descended a large round shape that might once have been Robotnik's Egg-o-Matic. It was three or four times bigger than the original, which had only just been big enough for its tubby creator to sit in. Gone were the stubby liitle wings, the single front headlight and the small windshield behind which Robotnik had crouched. The new device was sleek, streamlined and looked very, very dangerous. It hung in the air in a way that suggested it was meant to stay there, unlike the original Egg-o-Matic which had always seemed to be fighting a losing battle against gravity. This was not a craft designed to hover mere metres above the ground; this was a craft that could fly around the sun, maybe even through it.

Along its smooth sides were an array of tubes that were possibly lasers or missiles but were definitely something dangerous. From the bottom hung a metal arm, with a spinning, shrieking chainsaw blade at the end. As Sonic watched it withdrew back into the body of the craft, and a small door clicked shut after it. In a cockpit which bulged out halfway down the craft, enclosed entirely in clear plastiglass, sat the evil, sneering face of Dr Ivo Robotnik. He was laughing hysterically, although the two friends could not hear a thing.

‘See? See?’ shouted Tails. ‘He's wiggling his moustache at us!’

‘That's the only thing you got right,’ muttered Sonic. He was not hopeful about their chances of beating this new machine, but he had to try an attack, if only to find out just how good its armour and armaments really were. Quickly he jumped out across the floor of the room, through the rubble left by the collapsed section of ceiling, and under the craft to where he hoped Robotnik could not see him. As it hovered lower, he summoned his energy and leaped and spun high into the air towards the trapdoor in the bottom of the fuselage, his spikes whirling like an organic blue buzz-saw.

He slammed into the metal machine with a wallop, trying to drive his way through its steel plating. Instead there was a *Crack!* as raw electricity shot between metal and hedgehog, arching through Sonic's body with a shock of several thousand volts.

‘YAAARGH!’ he yelled, jerking out of his Spin Attack and falling back to the floor, to land with a slam on a pile of smashed tiles. A small cloud of dust rose around him as he tried to pick himself up, aware that all his spikes had stood on end from the blast of power, and he probably looked most uncool indeed.

With a crackle, Robotnik's amplified voice filled the room. ‘Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!’ he bellowed. ‘Sonic and Tails — so glad you could drop in! Ha ha ha! What do you think of my Egg-meister? Glorious, is it not? A ship fit for a supreme sovereign — which I now am! Ha ha ha ha! I see you have already discovered one of its advanced security features, you pestilent hedgehog!’

‘No, Tails, don't!’ Sonic shouted, but he was too late. While the mad scientist had been distracted, the young fox had put down the dimensional warper, taken two or three

paces back and just as Sonic shouted he leaped into the air, grabbing onto the slim black nose-cone of the Egg-meister. Sonic braced himself for the expected sound of frying fox-hair, but it didn't happen. Instead the slightly dented trapdoor in the bottom of the machine slid open, and a multi-jointed metal arm slid out, twisting and bending up towards Tails. The pincers at the end grasped one of his tails and pulled hard.

‘Ouch!’ Tails exclaimed, letting go of the nose-cone. The pincers held him away from the body of the Egg-meister, dangling in mid-air by his tail. He swung back and forth, looking very undignified. The loudspeakers on the Egg-meister crackled again.

‘Ha ha ha! One down, one to go! And before you think of attacking again, Sonic, let me show you how accurate my master blasters are.’ The pointed nose-cone swivelled on its mounting, moving down to point at the black shape of the dimensional warper on the table.

‘No!’ shouted Sonic, and leaped for it, but the master blaster got there first. A beam of bright red light shot from it and hit the warper, which exploded. Droplets of molten plastic showered across the room, hot, smoking and stinging.

‘Oh *no*!’ Sonic moaned above the racket of Robotnik's laughter. ‘The dimensional warper!’ It had been their only escape route out of this place, and the only way that they could have returned to the Science Council to prove what Robotnik had been doing to time. Now their escape route had been cut off and they were stuck here until Robotnik defeated them or until something else happened. Sonic was not a dude who gave up hope easily, but this did look like a desperate situation.

‘Fifteen minutes, Sonic!’ yelled Robotnik, his amplified voice booming into the room. ‘That's all you and Tails have

left. Ha ha ha! I couldn't get you on my first sweep through time because you and your foxy friend are both orphans. Nobody knows who your parents are, so I could not tell my robot teams to eliminate them from history. But in fourteen minutes and thirty seconds my robots will have located the first hedgehog and fox that ever evolved on Mobius, and will destroy them. There will be no hedgehogs in Mobius's history, no foxes, no Tails and definitely no Sonic! Ha ha ha!'

'Sonic!' shouted Tails. 'Over by the table!'

'Which table?' shouted Sonic. He was fed up with Tails's rashness and stupidity. He had almost given them away to the rabbit, almost let Sonic fall to a sticky end on the cliff, had let Robotnik destroy the dimensional warper, and now was shouting daft instructions to him, when they both had just over fourteen minutes to stop themselves being erased from history. Briefly he wondered whether he should try attacking the Egg-meister again, but decided that would be almost as stupid as Tails had been.

'The table I was standing by! There's a time machine there! I found it just before laughing boy came through the roof!' Tails yelled. Inside the cockpit, Sonic could see Robotnik turn a strange purple colour, probably with rage. He had stopped laughing, and Sonic knew that was always a bad sign. The hedgehog dived from where he was standing towards the pile of equipment that still lay on the floor beside the destroyed warping device. The master blaster swivelled to follow him. There, on top of the pile that had fallen out of the cabinet on the wall, was a familiar shape — the Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne time machine that had caused all this trouble, or something very like it. Sonic lunged and grabbed it from the heap, then leaped high into the air as the master blaster blasted at the equipment he had been standing on a moment before. Red flashes, crackling sounds and the stench of burning metal

filled the room. The master blaster kept its aim steady, waiting for Sonic to drop back to the ground.

He didn't. Grabbing onto the top of the cabinet with his free hand, the hedgehog swung himself up on top of it. He balanced there for a moment, then just before the master blaster could react to his movement and take a new aim at him, he leaped towards the Egg-meister. Sonic soared over the cockpit, over the main body of the hovering machine and down the other side, to grab onto the metal arm that still extended from the trapdoor under the machine. He grabbed it one-handed and swung there for a second. Cool move!

‘Tails, catch!’ he shouted, and threw the shiny time device to his furry pal, who was still dangling from the pincers at the end of the metal arm. ‘Don't drop it!’

Tails grabbed for the artefact as it flew towards him. Too fast! His left hand missed the machine and knocked it up into the air. He grabbed for it with his right, but it bounced off that, spinning away. Sonic shut his eyes, unable to watch, and reopened them just in time to see Tails snag the machine out of the air with his second tail.

‘Awesome!’ yelled Sonic.

‘Bah!’ yelled Robotnik.

‘Cross your fingers!’ yelled Tails. He grabbed the machine in both hands, and hit the button in the middle of the dial on its side.

There was a click, and the world exploded.

6
EVERYBODY NEEDS A MUM

Everything was dark. Very dark, and very quiet. Tails uncurled a little from the tight ball into which he had wrapped himself, and sniffed the air around him. It stank of eggs.

‘Oh great,’ he said, his voice sounding strangely muffled to his own ears. ‘Sonic, are you there? Sonic?’

There was no reply. Tails tried to uncurl fully, but something stopped him; some kind of curved wall around him holding him in a fixed position. He reached out a hand and stroked the wall. It was stony but smooth and strangely warm to the touch. Feeling around the surface, he realised he was trapped in an oval, almost egg-shaped area about twice as big as he was.

‘Oh great,’ he said again, and tried shifting his position slightly. Something sharp and metallic poked him in the stomach, and he felt around in the darkness for it. He could tell from the strange curves that it was the time machine that he had used to get himself and Sonic out of Robotnik's underground base. At least, he hoped that Sonic had been close enough to be brought along with him to, well, wherever this was.

There was no obvious way out, and there wasn't much air in here: it tasted hot and thick already, and his breath was coming faster and faster as it tried to get enough oxygen to survive.

‘SONIC!’ he shouted desperately. No one replied, but something clinked against the outside of his stone prison. Tails stopped for a moment, digesting the fact, then grasped the time machine and struck its pointed end

against the stone wall in front of his cold wet nose. The whole space shook with the force of the blow, rocking backwards and forwards. Tails struck again and this time the tip of the device broke through the stone wall. A shaft of bright sunlight shone into his prison, illuminating the interior, and cool fresh air blew in. Once he had got his breath back, he used the blunter end of the time device to chip away at the edges of the hole he had made, enlarging it until there was enough room for him to scramble out into the bright day beyond. He blinked in the sunlight and looked around.

He was standing in a large muddy patch by the side of a lake. Around him were several large oval objects, and Tails suddenly realised that the reason his prison had felt egg-shaped from the inside was because it was in fact an egg; a very large one. Three or four others were littered around in the mud. Of Sonic, however, there was no sign.

The landscape around the lake looked familiar, but there was something strange about it. The layout was roughly the same as the Green Hill Zone had been, back in the old days when it was still green and hilly, but the hills seemed more like mountains, and all the plants and trees were different, bigger too. They covered the hillsides in a scrubby forest. Around them the grass grew thick and tall. The air smelled deliciously fresh, clean and pure, like a fresh spring morning.

One of the large eggs beside Tails began to rock slightly in the mud. Tails quickly took a step backwards. He had no idea what was hatching out, but if it fitted into the eggshell then it would be pretty large, and he suspected that it would not be another Tails.

Sonic was always saying that a hero knew when to stand and fight and when to flee, but Tails had not quite worked out the subtle distinction between the two. Should

he run to safety, or stand around and risk being devoured by — what? Birds hatched from eggs, but he remembered hearing that other creatures did too, like crocodiles and duck-billed platypuses. He had never seen a duck-billed platypus, but it sounded pretty sinister and he did not want to meet one, even a freshly hatched one. If only Sonic was here to advise him…

Something finally clicked into place in Tail's brain. ‘Sonic!’ he shouted and began to hammer on the top of the rocking egg with the metal time machine. After a few solid blows there was a cracking sound and a jagged line appeared around the egg, splitting it in two. One half of the shell fell away and a bedraggled blue hedgehog sat up in the other half, breathing heavily.

‘Not a second too soon, little dude,’ Sonic said, for it was he. His spikes, which had been stuck on end by the jolt of electricity he had suffered in Robotnik's laboratory, were smeared with eggy substances. He looked a mess. ‘Hero-wise, you're getting there. How's the time machine?’

Tails looked at it. The blunt end was slightly dented and it had gained a few new scratches where he had battered through the eggshell with it, but otherwise it seemed okay. He turned it over, and noticed something. There, on the underside, were the words *Copyright © Robotnik Industries*. He showed it to Sonic.

‘Whoooah!’ said the hedgehog. ‘I reckon that's all the proof we need that he's been using and abusing time; except now we can't get it back to the Fourth Dimension to prove it to the Science Council. Hey — do you think maybe those science dudes were wrong, and he did invent a time machine of his own? It's possible, partner.’

‘I don't think so, mate,’ Tails said, staring at the time machine. ‘This one looks too much like the one you found, the Mark-0 prototype that Orange invented. It couldn't be

a coincidence to have two so similar. I bet Robotnik was the one who stole it from the Fourth Dimension, took it apart, found out how it worked and built other ones just like it.'

'Yeah,' Sonic said. 'He said he'd sent robots back in time while we were fighting him, so he must have other machines. Hey — he said he was going to erase us from history! We've got to find those robots and stop them doing it. Priority number three!'

Tails sighed. 'What are numbers one and two?' he asked.

'Number two is find out where in time that kooky device took us when you hit that button. Number one is for me to get this gunk out of my spikes and smarten up. Whoever heard of a super-cool superhero saving the world while looking like he'd fallen into a bowl of eggnog?' The hedgehog turned, walked down to the edge of the lake, and doused his head in the water. A large dark shadow loomed over the lake, and Tails looked up to see what was causing it. His mouth fell open in astonishment.

'Sonic?' he squeaked.

Sonic shook his head, and fine drops of water sprayed around him. 'Not now, Tails, I'm busy. And you're blocking my light. How's a guy supposed to spruce himself up if he can't see his own reflection?'

'It's not me blocking your light,' Tails said, not taking his eyes off the enormous grey, leathery shape that was looming over him. A huge, almost childish face peered down out of the sky, supported there on the end of a very long neck which connected it to an enormous body which seemed to be an awfully long way away. He had never seen an animal this big before, nor quite as frightening. It was much bigger than Robotnik's Egg-meister, and Tails guessed if must weigh tonnes and tonnes. The huge face

lowered itself down out of the sky, looked at the nest of eggs, blinked stupidly and then moved over to inspect Tails, who was frozen to the spot. A pink tongue almost as large as Tails himself shot out of the creature's mouth and wrapped itself around the petrified fox, giving him a long slobbery lick that left him drenched.

‘*Sonic!*’ wailed the damp fox. The hedgehog looked around from where he was washing out his gloves.

‘What now? Eeeeeeeuurrk!’ he gulped.

‘Slobber,’ replied the dinosaur as its tongue descended on the startled hedgehog.

‘Oh, gross! Now I'm covered in dinosaur drool!’ exclaimed Sonic. ‘Why didn't you chase it away, Tails? Now I've got to wash again.’

‘Me? Chase it away? On my own?’ Tails looked up at the gigantic shape of the dinosaur as it loomed over them. It looked back, blinking slowly and with what looked like a happy smile on its enormous lips. ‘Anyway, it's friendly.’

‘It tried to drown me in dribble!’

‘Nope,’ Tails said, looking at the cracked shells of the two eggs they had arrived in. ‘I reckon it's the one that laid all those eggs. It thinks that we've hatched out of them — that we're its babies. Aww!’

Sonic looked up at the happy mother above them. ‘Please,’ he said, ‘please tell me there is no family resemblance.’

Tails glanced at the dinosaur, then at Sonic. ‘Oh, I don't know,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it tells us when we are in time. We're in the prehistoric. When dinosaurs ruled the world and all that. Now we've just got to find those robots that are trying to make us extinct.’

‘Wrong! First I wash my spikes, *then* we go find those robots.’ He strode back to the edge of the lake and started washing again. Tails looked around, then walked over to a nearby clump of tall grasses and picked a large handful. He held it out in the direction of the dinosaur and made encouraging noises. The huge head descended and carefully took the dainty mouthful from the fox's hand. It chewed contentedly for moment, then swallowed. Tails watched the slight bulge made by the grass slip all the way down the massive creature's neck to its body.

‘You know,’ he said wistfully, ‘being an orphan and all, and seeing as it was your egg I hatched out of just now, this is the first time I've really had someone I could call my mother. Although I have to admit you're not quite what I was expecting.’ The dinosaur stared at him, unblinking, then moved its head over to browse on the rest of the clump of grass. Tails reached over and patted it on its wrinkled neck. ‘You don't mind if I call you “Mum”, do you — Mum?’ he asked. The dinosaur did not seem to object. ‘And,’ continued Tails, looking at the unhatched eggs, ‘I suppose that means I'll have some grey, leathery brothers and sisters pretty soon. I could teach them how to run really fast.’

‘Don't be so soft!’ yelled Sonic from the lake.

The dinosaur's head reared up into the sky and it stared into the west for a moment, then turned away from Tails and its clutch of eggs, and began to gallop away with long strides that shook the ground. Sonic walked up to Tails, shaking the last drops of water from his spikes. He watched the dinosaur disappear into the distance.

‘You don't need to teach it anything about running,’ he said. ‘What happened? Mum get bored with your conversation, did she?’

Tails looked over to the west. ‘I don't think so,’ he said. ‘I think something scared her away.’

‘Could be those robots we're looking for,’ Sonic said. ‘Or it could be — augh! A heinous great flesh-eating Tyrannosaur!’

Tails looked in the direction of Sonic's stare. ‘Nah,’ he said ‘It looks more like a Utahraptor.’

‘A what?’

‘Utahraptor. They were about the same size as a Tyrannosaur but faster, more vicious and hungrier. Look at that huge claw on its hind foot — that's a Utahraptor all right. Supposed to be the most vicious dinosaur that ever lived.’

‘Never mind that now, encyclopedia-brain! Run away! Run away very fast!’ shouted Sonic. The approaching monster was coming towards them, teeth bared, its eyes glinting in the bright sunlight, its enormous legs eating up the distance that separated it from the troubled two heroes as they turned and sprinted away.

Tails took an early lead, but within seconds Sonic had passed him, his red shoes whipping through the long grass as he hurtled towards the nearest patch of forest. ‘Into the trees!’ he shouted over his shoulder. ‘It won't be able to follow us in there!’

Tails did not need a second warning; he changed his direction and steered his way towards the enormous trees. Behind him he could hear the heavy footfalls of the enormous beast as it charged after them, its heavy breath hot and foul on the back of their necks. Tails knew that he was the second fastest creature in the Green Hill Zone, but he had never raced against anything as big as this Utahraptor. Its legs alone were ten times as high as he

was, and it was getting closer with every massive step. No wonder the other dinosaur had scarpered so fast.

Tails leaped a bush of brambles and shot into the undergrowth of the forest area. ‘Safe!’ he exclaimed, slowing down to look back and up at the massive lizardoid as it stood at the edge of the woods, foxed by the thick barrier of trees in its way. Its black slitted eyes swivelled back and forth, scanning through the dense foliage for a sight of its prey. Unfortunately for Sonic and Tails, blue and orange are not the most inconspicuous of colours, and they stood out like two fried eggs on a mantelpiece. The mighty creature roared, leaned forward and swiped at the trees in its way with its shrivelled forelimbs. Branches and leaves went flying. Tails gazed up at the Utahraptor in horror.

‘Come on, little dude!’ Sonic yelled, grabbing his friend by the arm and dragging him deeper into the forest. Together they ran on, leaving the thunder-lizard behind them. As they penetrated deeper into the woodland, its roars and the crashing sounds faded into the distance. After a while they slowed their run to a walk, taking the chance to look around them. Tails recognised some of the trees and plants they passed, they were just like the ones in the Green Hill Zone he knew, but bigger. Others were completely new to him. Large insects buzzed in the bushes and once a huge dragonfly with wings almost twenty centimetres across flew across their path, its body sparkling with metallic colours. Sonic tensed as he saw it, until he realised what it was.

‘Sorry, dude,’ he said. ‘Natural instincts. I thought it was one of Robotnik's robots.’

‘Speaking of which,’ Tails said, ‘how are we going to find the robots he sent back to change history by wiping

out our ancestors. All we know is that they haven't succeeded yet, because we're still here.’

‘If you didn't change the settings on the time machine, we can bet we're in the right time zone too,’ Sonic said. Tails nodded: he hadn't touched the dial before pressing the button. They walked on, each thinking hard about what to do next.

Eventually they came to the edge of a natural clearing deep in the woods. It looked beautiful, with a sparkling stream running through it, large sun-warmed boulders and old, gnarled trees with their branches draped with ancient moss. It would have been perfect except for the small group of figures standing beside the stream. Five of them were metal, and Sonic and Tails looked at each other as they recognised them as a squad of Robotnik's most feared minions. The robots brandished unpleasantly pointed guns at the two other figures in the clearing, who stood with their hands in the air.

Tails gasped quietly. The two figures looked very familiar. One of them was a muddy brown colour, with thin legs and several rows of spikes down its back. The other was orangey-red, with a fine fluffy tail lying on the ground behind him. Both had white paws and worried expressions on their faces. Given a few million years of evolution and some slight colour changes, it could have been Sonic and Tails standing there, facing the robots' weapons. These two must be the ancestors that Robotnik had shouted about in his laboratory — the very first hedgehog and fox to evolve on planet Mobius.

Sonic turned to Tails. ‘That's us, dude,’ he whispered. Tails looked back at him.

‘I know,’ he whispered back. ‘Quickly. They've — we've — only got seconds to live.’

‘We could sneak up and attack…’ started Sonic, but Tails cut him off.

‘Too slow — and if we attack two of the robots, the rest will wipe out our ancestors,’ he said, and paused for a second. An idea struck him. ‘Look, I know you're the main hero here, but just follow my lead, okay?’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘No time to explain. Follow me!’ Tails leaped up, out of the undergrowth at the edge of the clearing, and sprinted across it. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Sonic was doing the same. He dashed towards the group of metal beings who looked so out of place in this prehistoric setting.

‘Over here!’ he yelled. ‘We're the ones you want! Not them!’ The robots swung round, their guns already aiming at the bright pelts of the newcomers. Tails was ready for this and threw himself high into the air in a spinning leap, as bullets, bolts and beams exploded where he had been a second before. He shot through the air, touched down briefly on the top of one of the huge boulders, and sprang from it up into the branches of one of the trees that overhung the area, grabbing it with both paws. He swung there for a moment, looking back at the action below.

Sonic shot across the clearing and into the bushes on the other side. As Tails had hoped, the robots were ignoring their former captives and were giving chase, but were nowhere near as fast. The prehistoric fox and hedgehog were already speeding in the opposite direction, towards the safety of the thickest part of the wood. Then a bolt of purple light shot past his nose and Tails realised that he had better make sure he was safe too. Leaping and swinging from branch to branch, he sped through the treetops, sending hordes of huge insects buzzing up into

the sky as he disturbed their habitat. Careful not to squash any butterflies, he sped towards the edge of the woodland.

Within a minute he was standing at the top of a tree at the edge of the forest, looking out towards the lake where they had arrived. There was no sign of Sonic or the robots yet, but he could hear crashing sounds coming through the woods as they approached. More important to his plan was the hulking shape of the Utahraptor, lumbering away towards the lake but still in sight.

Tails put two fingers in his mouth and gave a long, piercing whistle. The enormous scaly beast stopped in its tracks and turned to look back. Tails gave another whistle. ‘Oi! Over here, oh vicious one!’ he yelled. The carnivore smiled, exposing teeth that most elephants would have been proud to call tusks, and pumped its massive legs into action, bounding its ungainly way back towards the forest.

Tails slid down the tree to the ground. ‘Sonic! Over here!’ he shouted. There was a rustling noise and the blue hedgehog appeared beside him, skidding to a stop.

‘Howdy! Incoming robots,’ he said, then noticed the bounding shape of the Utahraptor, now less than a hundred metres away. ‘Awesome,’ he added. ‘Caught between a rock-head and some hard cases. This had better be part of your plan.’

‘It is,’ nodded the fox. Thundering noises behind them indicated that the robots were getting close. There was a fizzing sound as purple lasers shot out of the bushes behind them.

‘Now — *run!*’ shouted Tails. Sonic looked at him for a second.

‘That's your plan?’ he asked.

‘You'll see! Come on!’ Tails dashed out of the woods, followed a moment later by his blue buddy. The ravening

dinosaur turned to follow them, but before it could, the five robots burst out of the undergrowth at the edge of the forest, in hot pursuit of their quarry. The Utahraptor blinked briefly, roared and headed off in pursuit of the robots.

Wind was whipping through Tails's fur as he put every speck of energy he could into running as fast as he could. He glanced back for an instant, to see the robots a few strides behind him and Sonic, and the Utahraptor a few giant strides behind them. It seemed to be eyeing them and drooling as it raced along. Tails and Sonic were accelerating steadily away from the robots, and the dinosaur was catching up with them fast.

‘Yes yes yes! Go go go!’ Tails shouted into the wind, and put in one last burst of speed. Behind him there was a loud clang and a metallic shriek; and then another, followed by a loud prehistoric bellow of triumph. Tails screeched to a halt, skidding slightly on the long damp grass, and turned to look back at what was happening.

The Utahraptor had, as he had guessed, caught up with the robots. Three of them were now completely flattened, stomped flat into the ground by the mighty dinosaur's feet. As the fox watched, one huge foot raised off the ground and caught one of the last two robots in the middle of its back, catapulting it high into the air, soaring over the heads of the watching heroes to land in the middle of the lake. A spark of light and a bubble marked the point where it sank.

The remaining robot turned round and aimed its laser gun between the approaching monster's eyes. Before it could fire, the mighty lizard bent down, jaws wide, and scooped up the metal titbit. It chewed thoughtfully on the robot, making an audible crunching sound, then its eyes fixed on the hedgehog and fox which stood watching it.

It took a step towards them.

‘Crumbs!’ Tails blurted. Sonic was already a blue blur on the horizon, so fast had he reacted. As he watched, the dinosaur's ravenous expression changed to one of puzzlement, and then distaste. With a mighty roar it spat the mangled remains of the robot out of its mouth, turned away and stalked off into the west, in search of other, tastier victims. The carcass of the robot shot across the open plains of the zone, hit the ground, bounced twice and came to a stop nearby. Tails trotted over to it.

‘Weird,’ he said. ‘It can't have liked the taste very much, and I suppose it thought that Sonic and I were robots too, so it didn't bother with us.’ He kicked the destroyed robot and it rolled over. A small door in the front of its chest snapped open, revealing a cavity containing a familiar device. Tails bent down in astonishment and picked it out, wiping the drool off it.

‘Not another one of those things?’ asked Sonic, who had reappeared. ‘I thought the bods in the Fourth Dimension said there was only one Mark-0 time machine, and that's the third we've found today. Someone's got their sums wrong.’

‘I reckon this one's the original,’ Tails said, turning it over. ‘Look, there's no copyright symbol on it. The one you grabbed in Robotnik's lab must have been his spare.’

‘Or a spare,’ Sonic corrected. Tails nodded.

‘What should we do about these mashed robots?’ he asked. ‘In our normal history, there wouldn't have been any smashed robots lying about in prehistoric times.’

Sonic shrugged. ‘Let the historians discover them fifty million years from now,’ he said, then froze as something rustled in the long grass behind him. He and Tails turned around very slowly, and as they did, two figures rose

slowly out of the grass. It was the two primitives that they had seen briefly in the forest clearing: the brown hedgehog and his foxy companion.

For a long moment the four of them stared at each other. The resemblance between the two hedgehogs and the two foxes was astonishing. Tails could not help cracking a smile as he stared at the other fox, his forebear — in fact, the very first of his ancestors. Slowly the native fox extended one of his white paws, palm up. There was some kind of berry in it.

‘Careful, pal,’ warned Sonic.

‘Don't worry. He's family,’ replied Tails. He took the berry, put it in his mouth and chewed on it. Sweet juices flooded over his tongue and he smiled at the sensation, before taking the fox's paw in his own and giving it a firm, friendly shake. The fox's eyes met his own and smiled back at him.

The two hedgehogs watched this display with bemusement, then the brown hedgehog turned to his blue descendant and shrugged his shoulders. Sonic reached up and tapped the side of his head with his index finger. The brown hedgehog smiled: the universal gesture for ‘Excuse my companion: he's barking!’ had obviously been understood. The hedgehogs watched each other for a moment more, then blue paw slapped against brown in a triumphant high-five; a meeting of minds across millions of generations. The hedgehogs grinned; then the two ancient ones looked at each other, smiled one last time at their new friends from the future, turned away and ran back towards the forest. Sonic and Tails watched them go.

‘Catch you later, proto-Sonic and Tails,’ the foxy one murmured.

‘Not bad,’ Sonic said thoughtfully. ‘Not bad at all. They'll have to learn to pick up their heels faster than that

if they're going to get away from that Utahraptor in future.'

'Yeah,' Tails said. 'But we're here, aren't we? So they must have survived. We have two most excellent ancestors, Sonic.'

The two distant figures stopped at the edge of the wooded area and looked back, waving, before they disappeared into the darkness of the trees. 'Goodbye, great–great–I–don't–know–how–many–greats–grandad,' muttered Tails. 'Take care of yourself, ancient dude.'

Sonic put a friendly arm around his companion's shoulder. 'Sorry about what I said earlier about you calling that dinosaur your mother, dude,' he said. 'Family's important. And — well, we may both be orphans, no mother or father, but we know we've got some sort of family now.'

'Yeah,' agreed Tails. 'Coming back to the dawn of time to find our family — that sounds like some kind of barmy paradox.'

'Aha!' said a harsh voice from in front of them. 'Halt! Don't move!'

Sonic and Tails halted as patches of the grass around them shimmered from green to silver, becoming the shapes of six silver-clad human figures. They stood up, enclosing the two friends within a circle. Each figure wore a helmet that completely hid their face, and they all held small objects in their hands — objects that could only be guns.

'Howdy guys, how ya doing?' Sonic breezed.

'We ask the questions around here, you time violators,' snapped the figure who had spoken, before stepping forward to take the two Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne time machines from Tail's astonished grasp. 'I arrest you both

on a charge of suspected time disruption, class four, and the illegal possession of stolen time-travelling equipment!’

7
SOME HISTORICAL-TYPE EXPLAINING

‘Bogus!’ exclaimed Sonic and Tails together.

One of the silvery figures stepped forward from the circle, carrying two metallic objects which looked like large figure eights. ‘Hold out your arms,’ he instructed. Sonic glanced around the circle, counted the number of guns and decided that resistance was probably useless. He held out his arms, and Tails followed suit a moment later. The person in the silver uniform pressed one of the eights onto Sonic's wrists, and the astonished hedgehog watched as the metal seemed to flow over and around his arm, solidifying on the other side to handcuff him securely. Tails was cuffed in the same way.

‘All right, you two,’ said the silver figure, obviously the leader. ‘You're nicked, good and proper. We heard you talking about your ancestors a moment ago. Planning a little paradox creation, were we?’

‘A what?’ asked Sonic.

‘Paradox creation. The oldest time-travel trick in the microfiche. Every new kid who invents or steals one of these gizmos —’ he waved one of the time machines ‘— wants to try the old “go back in time and bump off granny” routine for themselves.’

Sonic's mind raced back to his meeting with Orange and Grey, back in the corridors of the Fourth Dimension. They had said something about all this sort of stuff, but he had ignored it at the time because he had assumed that

they were mad scientists, and were talking rubbish. Now someone else had said the same thing, he was not so sure.

‘What's this thing about snuffing your old folks?’ he asked. ‘Why would anyone want to? It doesn't figure.’

The leader looked at the others. ‘We've got a right one here. Okay, look, you've got a time machine. You go back in time to when your grandmother was a young woman — er, hedgehog — before she'd had any nippers, and you bump her off. So your mother is never born, and so you never exist. But if you never existed, then nobody goes back in time to kill granny, so she's alive after all, and you're born after all, and so you do go back and kill her, so you don't exist… It's called a temporal paradox, and it's a real mess to clean up. So our job is to stop you starting it.’

‘But we weren't going to do anything like that!’ exclaimed Tails. ‘We were here to save our ancestors from a horde of robots who were going to destroy them and erase us from history!’

‘A likely story,’ said the leader. ‘They all say that, you know.’ One of the other silvery figures coughed under its helmet. ‘What is it, Sergeant Karl?’ asked the leader.

‘They don't all say that, captain sir,’ reported the sergeant. ‘Because, as you know, there have not been any others. These are the first —’

‘Shut up, sergeant,’ the captain ordered, and turned back to Sonic and Tails. ‘You temporal criminals are all alike. Next thing, you'll be saying you're on some kind of mission from the Fourth Dimension.’

‘We are on a mission from the Fourth Dimension!’ they chorused.

‘Ha!’ the captain snapped, pulled something out of a pocket and started to punch buttons on it. Sonic turned to Tails.

‘This could be better than it looks, little dude,’ he said quietly. ‘If they're from the Fourth Dimension, they'll be taking us exactly where we want to go. Then we can give the time machine to the Science Council and get on with saving Mobius.’

‘If they don't chuck us in prison straight away,’ Tails said. He looked worried.

‘No talking!’ barked Sergeant Karl. Sonic glared at him. Karl purposefully unbuttoned the holster he wore at his waist and pulled out the biggest handgun that the hedgehog had ever seen. Sonic zipped up.

The leader of the group looked up from the device he had been using. ‘Prepare for time and dimensional displacement,’ he said. The group closed in around them and the leader punched a button. A bubble of shimmering light flickered into existence around them, hiding the outside world behind a curtain of vibrating patterns. Sonic wondered if this might be the last time he was ever going to see the Green Hill Zone. Admittedly it was not quite the same as the zone he had called home for so long, but it was close enough.

The bubble solidified, and suddenly seemed to drop down into the ground, accelerating at a tremendous rate. It began to vibrate and shake until the two animals were certain that it would disintegrate at any moment. The soldiers, however, did not seem especially concerned.

With a flash the bubble of light disappeared, and Sonic and Tails found themselves standing on a sandy desert landscape — but only for a second. As if someone had turned over the page of a book, they were suddenly on the steps of a ruined temple, deep in a jungle somewhere — and then on the edge of a cliff overlooking an ocean; on a rocky asteroid drifting in a space-field; surrounded by leaping flames; in the path of a speeding juggernaut; and

finally surrounded by a crown of angry humans, wearing ragged clothes, shouting and waving flaming torches, pitchforks and rakes at them.

‘One day,’ said the captain, staring at the piece of equipment in his hand, ‘those lunkheads in the Science Division will get this thing to work properly.’ He thumped it and with a final flicker the scene changed one last time, to become a small concrete room with no windows and only one door. The silver soldiers snapped to attention as the captain strode to the door and flicked a switch beside it. The walls faded into nothingness, revealing a much larger room outside. This one was stacked with terraced seats, filled with an extraordinary array of people, beings and things. It reminded Sonic of the Science Council, except that all these people were wearing the same silver uniforms as the captain and his squad, only without the helmets.

‘Members of the Court of the Time Police, your attention please,’ declaimed the captain, striding over to Sonic and Tails.

‘Time Police!’ whispered Tails.

‘Shhh,’ Sonic said. The captain glared at them, and continued his speech.

‘I have called you here for the first time,’ he said, ‘for a historic moment. We have captured two prisoners whom we arrested in the act of disrupting time —’

‘Is this true, captain sir?’ asked a wizened old woman on the front bench of the room. Sonic noticed she was wearing a badge like an eight-pointed star that looked very familiar, but he could not quite place it. ‘Have the Time Police really captured some time criminals at last?’ she asked.

‘I believe so —’ started the captain, but the rest of his words were drowned out by massed cheers from the people on the benches. They stood up, they applauded, they danced, they hugged each other, they threw their helmets in the air in celebration. ‘At last!’ they shouted. ‘At last!’

Tails turned to Sonic. ‘Get the impression they're not very good at their job?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ replied the hedgehog. ‘And that's bad news for us. If we're the first people they've ever caught, they're really going to want to send us to jail. Like, totally. We're in deeeeep trouble.’

Eventually the hubbub died down and the members of the court resumed their seats. The captain pulled off his helmet and placed it on the floor. His head was human but very square, and his black hair was cut to within a few millimetres of his scalp, making it stand on end like a coat of very fine spikes. He was grinning all over his face, obviously very pleased with himself.

‘We captured these two beings in possession of two time machines,’ he said, pulling the two devices he had taken from Sonic and Tails out of a pocket inside his uniform. ‘One of them, as you can tell, is the missing Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne prototype, which the Science Council notified us about one hour ago. The other one looks just like it, implying that these strange other-worldly criminals have access to *Advanced Duplication Technologies*.’ Everybody gasped, but the captain continued: ‘I have already told the leader of the Science Council of our recovery of their prototype and the capture of these criminals, and she will be here immediately. Meanwhile,’ he turned to the two cuffed friends, ‘I shall commence tortu — questioning these two, to see how they broke through our security.’

There was a crash as a pair of double doors at the far end of the courtroom burst open and an extremely powerful and streamlined gold-coloured motorbike zoomed through, screeching to a halt in the centre of the room. Its rider, a small figure in gold robes, killed the engine, kicked down its stand and climbed off it before taking off a gold helmet that looked more like a Trojan warrior's headpiece than a crash helmet. Underneath it the face of the young girl who had been in the Science Council was revealed. She ran one hand through her short brown hair, and looked around. The room fell silent. Sonic waved at her as best he could, considering his hands were cuffed together.

‘You idiots,’ she said. ‘What do you think you're doing?’ It was hard to tell exactly who she was speaking to. She strode up to the captain and grabbed the two time machines out of his hands, then spun round, produced her black staff with a ruby tip which Sonic had seen earlier, and pointed it at the two prisoners. Their strange handcuffs softened and flowed from around their wrists, to fall off and land on the concrete floor with a wet clang. She turned back to the captain.

‘Didn't these two tell you they were on a mission for us?’ she demanded.

‘Well yes, but I didn't —’ stuttered the captain.

The girl stamped her foot. ‘But me no buts,’ she said. ‘You're an idiot, and you always have been, Captain Sir. I hereby demote you to the rank of Sergeant. You are now Sergeant Sir. Sergeant Karl, you may now consider yourself Captain Karl.’

‘Thank you, your Science Councilship,’ the new captain smirked. The girl looked over at the front bench, to where the old woman wearing the eight-pointed star was sitting, and gestured to her. The old woman stood up and spoke to the assembly.

‘All right, you can go,’ she said. ‘There's been a mistake. Nobody's going to be tortured or imprisoned today. Nothing to see. Shove off.’ The massed crowds shuffled to their feet and began to leave the room, grumbling as they went. The woman turned back and marched to the middle of the room where Sonic, Tails and the girl were standing.

‘Sorry for the confusion,’ she said. ‘I'm Elder Kay. This is Elder Jay.’ The young girl smiled and nodded. ‘Who exactly are you two?’

‘I'm Sonic the Hedgehog,’ Sonic said, ‘and this is my colleague Tails, du — er, I mean ba — er, nice to meet you.’

‘Nice to see you again,’ said Elder Jay. ‘I gather you had a little trouble getting back. Do you have any proof of the time disruptions you talked about at the Science Council?’

‘You're holding it!’ Sonic said. He took the time machines from her and turned them over, showing her the one with Robotnik's markings on it. Elder Jay frowned.

‘So he's not only stolen one of our machines, but he's managed to build copies of it. Do you know if the copy works?’

‘It works okay,’ Tails said. ‘It got us out of a very sticky situation.’ He described the fight in Robotnik's stronghold, including the destruction of the dimensional warper. ‘Sorry about that,’ he added lamely. ‘I suppose it was my fault. If I hadn't been so cocky and go-ahead, and had listened to Sonic instead, we might still have it.’

‘Don't worry about it,’ said Elder Kay. ‘My agents are always losing or damaging equipment. We're used to stuff going missing.’

‘Except for important time-machine prototypes,’ said Jay. ‘You've done us a great favour by recovering this. In

return I'll assign as many Time Police as necessary to capture this Professor Robotnik and straighten out all the damage he had caused to Mobius's history. It'll be back to normal in no time. No time. A little joke. Ha ha.'

'Thanks, your Elderness, but no thanks,' Sonic said. He had seen the Time Police in action, and was reasonably certain that anything they did to Mobius's history could only make things worse rather than better. Besides, something was beginning to itch at the back of his brain. All the talk of changing history, creating paradoxes, making new things happen and stopping others from ever occurring had taken root in his imagination and was now beginning to blossom into what he thought was a rather nice plan. 'I've got a rather nice plan,' he said.

'Oh really?' Kay said.

Sonic paused for a moment as his stomach rumbled and he realised that he had been on the move since things on Mobius had started changing, and he had been feeling hungry then. 'Is there any way we could get a bite to eat around here?' he asked. 'I feel like I haven't eaten for several million years.'

Jay smiled. 'You probably haven't,' she said. 'What do you feel like? I understand that ordinary hedgehogs like worms, but I can see that you're no ordinary hedgehog. We can get anything here. Champagne and caviar? Jellied eels? Larks' tongues in aspic?'

'Fast food,' Sonic said. 'What else would I eat?'

'Of course,' said Kay. 'Shall we eat and talk here, or somewhere a little more relaxed?'

'We could go to my quarters,' offered Jay, 'but it is quite a trek and I'm not sure how all four of us would get on my bike.'

‘That‘s okay,’ Sonic said. ‘You two ride. Tails and I will run beside you.’

‘Are you sure you will keep up?’ asked Jay.

‘Like you said,’ Sonic said, ‘I'm no ordinary hedgehog.’

The trip through the corridors was, as Jay had warned, a long and boring one, even at high speed. Several times they passed through areas which were blackened from fire or with craters and pockmarks in the walls and floor where some kind of firefight had recently taken place. At one point they hurtled through the large room where the crowd of multicoloured scientists were still waiting for access to show their latest creations to the Science Council, sending the boffins scattering in all directions.

After what must have been kilometres of endless corridor, Jay finally skidded her bike to a controlled halt beside a large door with a member of the Time Police in ornate ceremonial uniform stood on guard outside it. She passed the bike to the guard and led the others into the room.

Sonic was not sure what he had been expecting, but this was not it. There might have been pillars, marble floors, fine antiques culled from all periods of history, interesting and curious alien artefacts, great works of art on the walls. Or it might have been the latest in stylish design, with lots of strange items made out of matt black metal and designed to look like something else, displayed on furniture made of glass or out of wire, with video terminals and computer keyboards displaying information that was constantly being updated from far-off places. It might even have been a wood-panelled library with a roaring fire, elegant and distinguished, befitting for the leader of the Science Council.

Instead, it looked like a nine-year-old girl's bedroom. Boy, was it messy. There were t-shirts and comfortable pairs of jeans strewn on the floor, along with shoes, books, computer disks, magazines and open notebooks filled with complex formulae and electronic diagrams drawn in green pen. The bed looked as if it had not been made for three weeks. There were pictures of ponies stuck to the mirror on the table, comics on the desk and posters on the walls — one of a kitten in a teacup and one of some unnamed pop group with pouty faces, tight jeans, odd musical instruments and strange haircuts. At least two members of the group were definitely not human or any animal that Sonic had seen before. He thought he spotted a Game Gear sticking out from under the bed amidst the mess.

Jay took off her heavy gold robe and threw it at a hook on the back of the door. It missed and slithered to the floor in a heap. Underneath the robe she was wearing a t-shirt that said ‘I'm The Boss’ in big gold letters, and a pair of brightly coloured stretchy leggings. She cleared a stack of papers and pyjamas off the bed and dumped them onto the table, next to a collection of empty glasses and cups. ‘I hope there's enough room for everyone to sit down,’ she said.

‘Jay, what have I told you time and time again about keeping your room tidy?’ asked Kay. ‘This place is a disgrace! You know what I always say: “A tidy room shows a tidy mind”. You'll never run that Science Council of yours properly until you learn that, young lady.’

‘Sorry, grandma.’ said Jay, hanging her head.

‘Grandma?’ Sonic said. ‘You guys are related?’

Jay nodded, then turned back to her aged relative. ‘Sorry. grandma. It's just that I've been so busy lately trying to deal with the invasion of the mythos creatures, and locating that missing time machine, and hearing all

the reports on new discoveries in the Science Division, and doing my homework and research; I haven't had time, honest.' Sonic noticed that she was holding her hands behind her back, and had her fingers crossed.

'I bet I can think of someone who'd like to go back in time and bump off her grandmother,' he whispered to Tails.

'Whassat?' said Tails, who had not been paying attention. Sonic sighed in exasperation, and turned to Jay.

'Hey,' he said, 'you mentioned the mythos things. Are they still attacking? We saw the crisped bits in the corridors. It looked like they'd been having a party with those weapons of theirs.'

Jay sighed. 'Yes,' she said. 'They're still coming, and they're getting nearer every hour. We reckon we can hold out for a couple more days — if the Time Police do their job properly and keep them back.' She shot a look at her grandmother. 'It's desperate. I really can't think of a thing more we can do. For every new piece of technology we develop to fight them off, they develop something to stop it. The trouble is, it's almost impossible to kill an imaginary creature.' Her sentence was cut short by a knock at the door, and a tall man in a white coat came in with a large tray stacked with burgers, fries, hot apple pies, slices of pizza, hot dogs, crisps, nachos, ice cream and glasses of cola.

'Wizard!' exclaimed Tails. 'Bags I the cheeseburgers!'

'No way!' Sonic said. 'First come, first served, dude. And what's with this "wizard" stuff?'

'Now, you youngsters be careful that you don't make yourself sick,' butted in Kay. 'And remember that all those sugary foods will only rot your teeth and give you spots.

All the rubbish they put in food these days, it's not good for you.’

‘Cool it, grandma,’ said Jay. ‘I outrank you, so I decide what we eat. Anyway, you love pizza as much as I do. Get stuck in!

After fifteen minutes of happy chomping the tray was almost completely empty, apart from one fry that had gone soggy from too much ketchup and which nobody wanted. Sonic lay back on the floor, feeling very full. Jay sat up cross-legged on the unmade bed, picked up a notebook from the chair next to it, and looked down at the hedgehog.

‘We've eaten. Now we talk,’ she said.

‘Great! Talk away,’ Tails said, who was slouched at the foot of the bed.

‘No, you talk. You had a plan to sort everything out.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Sonic said, thinking for a moment. ‘Right. To explain this, I've got to go into some history here. History of planet Mobius, history of me, and history of Robotnik. It's a bit long, but it's crucial stuff. Hang with it. Here we go.’

And this is what he told them.

Many years ago, the planet Mobius was one of the most idyllic places in the entire universe. Peaceful, tranquil and lush, it hung like a jewel in the starry skies of the eastern spiral arm of the galaxy. Its reputation as a beauty spot had spread so far and so many beings wanted to visit it that in order to keep it unspoiled the galactic authorities had removed its location from all star-charts, and said only that it lay at an ‘Unspecified point in time and space’.

All of this was completely unknown to the planet's inhabitants, who continued their daily lives on the surface and were happy there. They were all what scientists would call ‘anthropomorphics’; animals who looked and behaved like humans, or maybe just people who looked like animals. They stood on two legs, used their hands to hold things, talked, joked, sang, had picnics, played jokes on each other and generally had a bodacious time. They were of all species: rabbits, pigs, foxes, monkeys, birds and many others.

Unknown to them and the galactic police, one person from outside Mobius had managed to find the planet, and to land there. Admittedly it had been a mistake: he had crash-landed there while on a scientific expedition. With his ship destroyed, and finding himself stuck in such a beautiful place, he decided to make the best of it and to get on with his scientific work there, but somewhere where he would go unnoticed — underground.

Meanwhile, on the surface of the planet, the people of the Green Hill Zone found a young hedgehog. His parents could not be located despite everyone's efforts, so everyone decided to bring him up on their own. They taught him everything they knew: running, jumping, tunnelling, cunning and smarts; plus unfortunately a cocky, stubborn streak and a sense that he was the coolest thing on the planet. They called him Sonic, for some reason that everyone has now forgotten. At this time he was just a normal brown hedgehog.

One fateful afternoon, I — I mean, Sonic was playing, planning to surprise his pal Porker Lewis by tunnelling through the side of a mountain, to appear underneath the sunbathing pig. The tunnel started well, but after a few metres Sonic found himself falling into some kind of underground room, almost landing on a tall, slim man

wearing a white laboratory coat. He had orange hair and a kindly expression. After muffled greetings and introductions the man explained that he was Doctor Ovi Kintobor, stranded on Mobius when his ship crashed, and was currently engaged in an attempt to truly make the planet the most perfect place in the universe, by gathering up all the wicked chaos-energy on the planet and trapping it inside six large gemstones, which he called the Chaos Emeralds, and where it would then be neutralised by a seventh gemstone, the Grey Emerald. He had the six Chaos Emeralds and he had the technology to collect all the chaos, but could not find a Grey Emerald anywhere, although he was certain that there was one somewhere on Mobius.

Sonic agreed to help look for it, and in return Kintobor agreed to train his new friend's natural abilities. The scientist built him a sonic treadmill, which the hedgehog used to build up his speed and stamina, and special friction-reducing running shoes to give Sonic extra grip and to stop his feet overheating at the extreme speeds he was beginning to reach. It was on the treadmill, wearing the running shoes, that Sonic finally pushed himself to his upper limits, running so fast that his hedgehog body overtook the speed of sound — and changed. When the treadmill slowed to a stop, Kintobor was astonished to see that his hedgehog buddy was completely blue, and that his normal hedgehog spikes had fused together to form a streamlined, aerodynamic shape. Nobody was quite certain what had happened to him, but Sonic knew: he was someone special now, a hero! The only problem was that heroes need villains to pit their wits and talents against, and at the moment he did not have one. But he did not have long to wait.

The search for the Grey Emerald had got nowhere, but Kintobor's experiments with chaos control had progressed

further and further, until the scientist was certain that he could control the six Chaos Emeralds using his Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor, or ROCC for short, without having the seventh to neutralise them in case anything went wrong. Sonic was not so certain about this but he trusted his friend's judgement. Besides, he liked hanging out with Kintobor and watching the ROCC do its stuff. It was an astonishingly beautiful machine, made almost entirely of loops of gold rings connected by delicate electronic components.

Before long, all of Mobius's chaos-energy had been transferred into the Emeralds via the ROCC, and Kintobor was ready to perform the final steps to neutralise it. Sonic was in the laboratory that day, hanging around and reading an old issue of *Eccentric Scientists Quarterly*, because he felt he ought to be on hand in case anything went wrong. After a while he got bored of the magazine, which had almost no pictures and only one comic strip in it, and went to raid the fridge for some lunch. Obviously Kintobor had been wrapped up his work, because the only thing left in there was a single hard-boiled egg, and to Sonic's trained nose it had almost certainly gone off. He took it over to his mentor, who was carefully typing the final sequence of critical commands into the ROCC.

What exactly happened next is, like, anybody's guess. The machine may have overloaded. The pressure of a whole planet's chaos-energy may have proved too much for six emeralds to contain. It is possible that Kintobor, distracted by the presence of a smelly egg, mis-typed a command.

There was a small explosion within the machine, and its protective force-field instantly extended to encompass Kintobor, the egg in his hand and the Chaos Emeralds next to the machine. Sonic, who was left outside the circle of the force-field, could only watch as beams of light leapt

from the machine to the Emeralds, pulsing with energy, and then as another beam lanced straight to the middle of Kintobor's forehead. The scientist's slim body began to swell and increase in volume, bloating outwards until his clothes split and Sonic was certain that his stomach was going to explode. He was turning from a human being — into an egg!

But before the transformation could complete itself, the ROCC exploded with such force that its golden components shot out of the laboratory, through the soil and out into the air, scattering themselves all over the surface of the planet. It was obviously beyond repair. A smell of rotten eggs filled the remains of the ruined laboratory. Sonic stared at his old friend's gross new shape: something had happened. Not only had his body changed, but it was as if it had been reflected in a mirror. His name badge was now on the other side of his coat, and the words on it had been reversed. ‘Dr Ivo Robotnik’ it read.

‘What are you gawking at?’ bellowed the scientist. ‘Get back to your rodent hole! I'm in control now! The Emeralds — it's all in the Emeralds! Now I am as chaotic and evil as them, and they shall help me control the world! And you, YOU SHALL BE DESTROYED!’

But the hedgehog was too fast and had left the laboratory even before the crazed chaos creature could grab for him. At last Sonic knew that he had found his role in life. Now it was time for hero stuff.

‘And the rest is history, dudes,’ finished the hedgehog. ‘Robotnik stuck the Emeralds into outer space, in the Warps of Confusion, and tried to take over the planet. I stopped him. Then a few years later he tried again, but

Tails had turned up by that time, an orphan like me, and we stopped him together.'

'Awesomely!' squealed the excited fox.

'Then somehow he got his time-travel gear and now he's having another go,' Sonic said. 'I just hope it's not third time lucky, or we're sunk.'

Jay had been listening intently to all this. Now she uncrossed her legs and swung them down to the floor. 'You said you had a plan. Where does that fit in?'

'Ah,' Sonic said. 'I had this totally excellent idea that we could stop all this nonsense before it ever starts. You've got two of those Gauss-Coyne time machines now, right? And it's a prototype, right, so you only really need one for testing. So give us the one Robotnik made, the copy, and zap us back to Mobius in the here-and-now. Then we'll zip back to the laboratory —'

'Robotnik's laboratory?' asked Kay.

'Nope, Kintobor's!' Sonic said. 'Tails and I, we'll stop the ROCC machine exploding. Wipe out! Kintobor never gets villainified into Robotnik, so Robotnik never steals your Gauss-Coyne time machine and never makes his copy of it, so the one we've got vanishes away, like it was never there — because it wasn't. Bingo! No more Robotnik, history sets itself right again because he wasn't there to change it, and Mobius is back to normal. It's actually one of your time paradox loop spiral things, but you don't notice because you don't actually know where Mobius is, and we don't notice because for us time will continue as normal. Excellent!'

Kay looked dubious. 'What's the alternative?' she said.

Jay looked up from the notebook where she had been scribbling calculations. 'According to my projections, if Robotnik's time alterations continue at their present rate,

he'll be thinking about trying to take over the entire universe in about three days' time. If the Time Police try to stop him, with their present rate of success —’

‘Which is zero,’ Tails said helpfully.

‘Precisely zero,’ Jay repeated, ‘then he'll succeed. Anything's got to be better than that, and I estimate that Sonic's plan has a 77.23% chance of working.’

‘The Time Police might get better,’ grumbled Kay.

‘Not if they're going to be busy fending off the mythos creatures,’ Sonic pointed out.

‘Even if they weren't, I estimate their chances of improvement at —’ Jay jotted figures, ‘— roughly 1.45%. Not good. Okay Sonic, you've got approval, and a one-use only licence to travel through time. Do it more than once and the Time Police will be really annoyed.’ She smirked at the hedgehog, who grinned back, sharing the joke.

‘The time machines are on the back of my bike,’ continued Jay. ‘You'd better get Agent Orange to help you program it — he's the only one who really understands how they work.’

‘Yeah!’ agreed Tails. ‘Last time we tried to use it, we ended up inside a couple of dinosaur eggs.’

‘I've heard that the Gauss-Coyne prototype does that a lot,’ said Kay. ‘Be careful, okay? Now you'd better get going. You've got a planet to save. Party on, er, dudes!’

8
WHEN ARE WE NOW?

The hover-platform glided swiftly and silently down the empty corridors of the Fourth Dimension, towards the Science Division laboratories. Agent Grey was steering with a small hand-held joystick that projected out of a column of metal in front of her, covered in dials and readouts. Next to her, Tails was letting the wind rush through his fur and enjoying the sensation of moving fast without having to put any effort into it. At the back were Sonic and Agent Orange. The scientist was holding the Robotnik version of the Mark-0 time machine, had opened up its metal casing and was fiddling inside its workings with a tiny screwdriver. The original prototype lay beside him. Luckily the motion of the hover-platform was so smooth that his precision adjustments to the intricate mechanism inside the casing were not jogged. As he worked, he was explaining the machine to Sonic.

'You see,' he said, 'the Mark-0 was never really meant to be operated by humans — or anyone else for that matter. It was designed to be fitted to machines, to let the Time Police take large pieces of equipment through time with them.'

'Like robots?' asked Sonic, thinking of the five metal creatures which had almost erased him and Tails from time.

Not exactly. Supply trucks, hover-cars, spacecraft and so forth were more what I had in mind when I created it. Although you could program a robot to use it, certainly. The problem is that the controls are very precise, and are

really too delicate to be set by hand. Attach the Mark-0 to a computer, on the other hand, and it'll do the job for you.'

'That's why we're going to your laboratory again, then,' Sonic said. 'I hope your Time Police guys have cleared old scaly-nut out of there before we turn up.'

'Arctur?' asked Orange. 'Oh yes. They turned up just after you left, and there was a tremendous battle between them and the mythos army, who were driven back in the end. Although I have to admit I don't remember seeing that dragonkin fellow being taken prisoner.'

'So the sector is clear, then?'

'Clear as a bell,' said Grey, turning back to look at the two of them.

'Not!' screeched Tails, grabbing the joystick from Grey's hands and yanking it frantically as a horde of black-suited soldiers sprang from doorways ahead and took aim at the hover-platform. Bolts of black light blazed around them, exploding the lights on the ceiling and ploughing gouges out of the walls as Tails swung the vehicle from side to side.

'There's no room to turn this thing round!' he yelled. 'How do I stop it?'

'Don't!' shouted Sonic, picking himself up from the deck where he had thrown himself flat, alongside Orange and Grey. 'Keep going!' He jumped over the prone scientists and ran to the front of the platform as it hurtled onwards towards the soldiers ahead.

'When we get close enough,' he instructed Tails, 'you take the ones on the left and I take the ones on the right. Okay, little dude?' The fox nodded, then ducked as a bolt from one of the mythos creature's guns almost parted his hair. The hover-car rushed on down the corridor.

Sonic measured the distance to the enemy through half-closed eyes. Almost within range — now! ‘Go!’ he yelled, and leaped from the vehicle, tucking in his feet and arms as soon as he was in mid-air, to make himself a perfect spinning circle of blue hedgehog fury. He aimed himself for the first soldier on the right-hand side of the corridor, landing on the creature's helmet with a solid thud. The soldier dropped to the floor, stunned, but Sonic had already bounced back into the air towards the next dark figure who was leaning out of a doorway, taking a careful aim on the hover-car's control column. Bonk! The figure collapsed, dropping his gun. The hover-car sped on, but with nobody at its controls it was now heading towards a wall. Agent Grey jumped up. She cried, ‘Oh no!’ The hover-car sped on. Grey grabbed the joystick from where it was hanging, steering the careering vehicle back into the middle of the corridor.

Sonic, spinning wildly towards his next target, glanced across the passage to see how Tails was doing. The orange pinball's first victim lay slumped across the floor but the fox was having some problem with his second. The mythos soldier seemed to be made entirely of granite, and Tails was bouncing up and down on his head, desperately trying to knock the stone soldier unconscious. As Sonic watched, Tails hit the creature for the third time, there was a cracking noise and its helmet split in two. The creature glanced up for a split second, then froze rigid, like a statue. Tails bounced off it, on to his next target.

Crack! Another down. Whomp! Whump! Thadoom! The floor was littered with troops in shiny black armour. Only two remained standing as Sonic and Tails spun towards them, and they went down like the final skittles in a perfect strike. The blue and orange balls shot up into the air one last time, uncurled, slapped each ther's hands in a mid-air high-five and dropped back towards the floor.

They did not get there. A last massive black-suited figure stepped out from a doorway and snatched them out of the air by the scruffs of their respective necks.

‘Gotcha!’ it snarled through jagged teeth. Golden slit eyes glared at them.

‘Arctur!’ uttered Tails in a throttled voice.

‘Dragonkin dude!’ exclaimed Sonic, waving his paws in the mighty lizard's face. ‘You got out of that prison suit, then. Hey, I got some advice for you, snake-face.’

‘Tell me, scum!’ the dragonkin demanded.

Sonic pointed back over his shoulder. ‘Duck, big guy,’ he advised.

Arctur followed the hedgehog's pointing finger and saw the hover-car, piloted by Grey, hurtling down on him at a fantastic speed. With a shriek Arctur threw up his arms, accidentally hurling Sonic and Tails up into the air, and dived sideways to the floor as the speeding vehicle shot over the point where he had been standing. The airborne twosome somersaulted once and landed on the hover-car's deck, beside the startled scientists. As Grey swung the machine around a corner, they caught a final glimpse of Arctur sitting up in the corridor behind them, waving a clawed fist in their direction.

‘Obviously not as clear as you thought,’ Sonic said. ‘Better get some more of those Time Cops of yours down here right away.’ Orange, obviously shaken by the experience, plucked a small radio hand-set from his pocket and began speaking into it.

A few minutes later, the hover-car slid to a silent stop outside a familiar laboratory storeroom door. Sonic noticed there were more scorch marks on the corridor's walls, and the door itself seemed to have taken a couple of hits. This

time, though, the door opened safely and there was nobody else inside.

Grey went straight in and started rummaging on one of the many shelves that lined the room. Orange hung around outside for a moment. ‘Have you got one of the Mark-0s?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Grey said vaguely, punching numbers into a white device that looked like a calculator.

‘Bother,’ said Orange. ‘It must have rolled off the hover-car during all the excitement. Ah well, we've still got the other one. I'll go back and look for it once we've got you two safely sent off.’

Sonic turned to Tails. ‘I'd say more than “bother” if I'd just lost a time machine,’ he whispered. ‘No wonder they keep losing important stuff.’

Orange brought the time machine into the room and laid it out on one of the workbenches. Grey produced a length of cable from one of the pockets of her laboratory coat, plugged one end into the white calculator and slid open a small hatch on the time machine to expose a socket where she plugged the other end.

‘This,’ she explained, holding up the white calculator, ‘is a one-use dimensional shifter. It'll take you back to your home planet. Yes, the quick way. As soon as you get there, it will self-destruct. That will trigger the time machine, as reprogrammed by my esteemed colleague here —’ Orange bowed slightly, ‘which will take you back to the exact time that your professor chum was transformed into his evil duplicate. After that, it's up to you.’

Orange sighed. ‘Nasty business, that stuff with the professor. It's a lesson to us all that scientists should not meddle in the things that man was not meant to know. He tried to control science, and it destroyed him. It's a story

filled with tension, drama and good dialogue, and I give it a thumbs up. Sorry, I was getting carried away.

Grey stared at her colleague for a moment, then shrugged and turned back to the two animals. ‘Ready?’ she asked, passing them the two connected machines.

‘Does the dimensional thing have to explode?’ Tails asked.

‘Absolutely,’ said Grey. ‘You've only got a one-off licence to use it. What better way to enforce that than by making sure you can't use it again? Anyway, if everything goes right then you won't need it again.’

‘That's not what's worrying me,’ the fox persisted, his furry expression troubled. ‘How big a bang is it going to make?

Grey laughed. ‘Hardly any,’ she said. ‘Just enough to destroy the inside of the machine. You may not notice it.’

Sonic relaxed a little: he had been worried as well, but as a hero he did not like to show it. ‘We're ready to go, most excellent science dudes,’ he said. ‘Plug us in and let it rip.’

Orange reached over and pressed a green button on the calculator. ‘This is goodbye, then,’ he said. ‘Best of luck. And I know this sounds funny, but I hope for your sakes that we never see you again.’

Sonic smiled. ‘I got your drift, dude,’ he said. His voice sounded strangely light and empty. He glanced across at Tails. The fox was fading away! He could clearly see the shelves behind his friend. Glancing at his own hands, he saw his feet through them, and the floor through his feet.

‘Don't worry,’ said Grey. ‘It's all part of the process. Goodbye, you two. Don't forget to write.’ The fox and hedgehog raised their paws and waved farewell to the scientists, but by then they were almost too faint to see.

Sonic found himself, completely solid, standing on nothingness. ‘Oh no,’ he said aloud. ‘We're back here again. Mega-downer.’ As he spoke, something began to fade into existence underneath his feet. It was completely grey and flat, stretching away to the horizon. He looked up, to see a grey sky, slightly lighter than the surface under-foot. There was no sign of a sun or any clouds. Beside him, Tails materialised out of nothing; a blob of bright colour on the otherwise completely bleak background.

‘Where are we?’ he asked the hedgehog.

‘The grey, flat Green Hill Zone, my guess,’ Sonic said. ‘Remember last time? Robotnik's had just as long again to keep changing history, making things the way he wants them.’ He looked down at the white dimensional shifter in Tails's paw. ‘Hasn't that thing blown up yet?’ he asked.

With a dull thud and a puff of brown smoke, it did just that, disintegrating completely. Sonic watched the silvery time machine in Tails's other paw, waiting for some sign it was working. Nothing happened.

‘How long did they say it would take?’ he asked.

‘They didn't,’ Tails said. ‘I thought it would be immediately.’

‘Me too,’ Sonic said. He peered off into the grey distance. ‘It had better get shifting pretty quick,’ he continued, ‘because here comes the welcoming committee, and it doesn't look very welcoming to me.’

Out of the grey plain, a grey box-like shape about the size of a house had risen up. A large round object lifted off from the top of it, hovered in the air for a moment to get its bearings, and swooped down in the direction of the new

arrivals. Half of it was coloured red and half was black, and as it approached it split along the dividing line between the colour into two identical half spheres. Each half angled itself to point at one of the two animals. The two pieces were a bright silver inside. They looked a little like flying satellite dishes.

‘What's the hold-up?’ asked Sonic, glancing between the approaching dishes and the time machine which sat quietly in Tails's paws.

‘I don't know!’ quavered the fox. ‘I'm not a scientist. Perhaps the link didn't work. Perhaps Robotnik's got some kind of device here that stops time machines working. Perhaps it got broken. Perhaps Orange programmed it wrong.’

Sonic snatched the apparatus from his friend and turned it over. There was no mark on it: not a scratch, not a dent and most importantly, not a copyright symbol. ‘That absent-minded orange jerk!’ he shouted. ‘He programmed the time machine Robotnik made, then he gave us the other one — the original! Of course we're not going anywhere!’ He stared hard at the dial on the side of the machine, trying to work out what the symbols engraved in the metal around it meant.

Tails shook his shoulder. ‘They’re getting awfully close,’ he said. Behind him, in the distance, Sonic could hear a faint whining, buzzing sound. It grew louder. He squinted closer at the dial, and realised that it was actually three dials, one inside another, and the button in the middle of them also had symbols engraved on it as well, which meant it was probably a dial that needed to be set as well. Four dials, and he did not understand the symbols on any of them. Even if he did, the four dials were simply too small and fiddly for his or Tail's fingers to adjust them to the right settings to get them out of here. They were

sunk; they would never get back to Kintobor's laboratory now. The planet Mobius was doomed to remain like this for the rest of time. He lowered the time machine and turned to Tails.

‘Sorry dude,’ he said, ‘but it's got the better of me. Guess I'm no scientist either.’ Above them, the two round dishes hovered to a standstill. In the middle of each dish, Sonic could see a small piece of glass, like a lens. The two dishes swivelled in the air, their lenses seeming to focus on the two animals and scan them.

‘Identify yourselves,’ demanded a voice. It did not sound like Robotnik, but on the other hand it did not sound particularly human either. For the first time in his life Sonic was ready to face defeat and tell his enemies who he was, but Tails spoke up first.

‘We're from the Fourth Dimension,’ he said, his voice brave but quavering around the edges. ‘We're on a mission. We've come to tell your leader that if he doesn't stop mucking around with time, there's going to be big trouble.’

There was a silence from the two hovering dishes. Sonic stared at his young friend in astonishment. It was a brilliant plan, he had to admit to himself, although he would probably never admit it to Tails.

The silver and red machine above them spoke up. ‘What kind of trouble?’ it said.

‘Big trouble,’ Sonic said. ‘He told you.’

The dishes considered this. ‘How big?’ asked the silver and black one.

‘Think of a number,’ Tails said. ‘Double it. Now double it again. Bigger than that.’

‘Gosh,’ said one of the machines. They were silent for a moment, then the red one made a clicking sound and

wiggled slightly in the air.

‘How do we know that you are who you say you are?’ it asked. Sonic watched as Tails strutted forward sharply and looked up at it, behaving perfectly like a miniature general.

‘I am Elder Tai — Elder Blue,’ he corrected. ‘This is my assistant, Captain Orange.’

‘The orange one is Blue and the blue one is Orange?’ interrupted the red dish.

Tails folded his arms and tapped his foot on the ground. ‘We're from the Fourth Dimension,’ he said. ‘We do things differently there. Captain Orange, step forward please.’

Sonic was not too happy about being described as Tail's assistant, but realised that if his friend's plan was going to work, he would have to go along with it. He took a pace forward.

‘In my assistant's hands,’ continued Tails, ‘is a product of the Fourth Dimension: the Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne prototype time machine. Your boss uses one just like it, because he stole the design from us.’

‘Device has been identified as a product of authentic Fourth Dimensional technology,’ said the black and silver hovering machine, turning to its counterpart. ‘But it is impossible to cross dimensions using a time machine. You must be lying.’ Its central lens began to glow with a red light.

‘No I'm not!’ exclaimed Tails. ‘That's the clever bit. This version of the time machine is more advanced than yours. That proves that we're who we say we are.’

Sonic was astonished by his friend's audacious lie, but right now he was grateful for anything that might save their hides. He watched the two hovering dish-like

machines carefully. They seemed to be considering the evidence.

‘You are on a mission from the Fourth Dimension,’ said the black and silver machine eventually, and the two friends breathed a quiet sigh of relief. ‘Now we will take you to the Lord-Emperor of Mobius, PhD.’

‘You mean Doc Robotnik?’ asked Sonic. Both machines swivelled in the air to focus their lenses at him.

‘Do not say his sacred name aloud!’ whispered the red dish reverentially. ‘He is the great Lord-Emperor who created us all and made the planet in his own image. We are not fit to clean the egg-yolk stains from his moustache, but he has granted us the honour of letting us guard the surface of the planet he rules.’

‘Wait a minute,’ Sonic said. An idea had begun to form in his mind — one that might be able to save them and get them out of here. He hoped he could rely on Tails to back him up. ‘How do we know that you two are who you say you are? You might be rogue robots, sent to lead us to our doom.’

The hovering dishes regarded him. ‘The Lord-Emperor has programmed us to be unable to lie,’ it said.

‘But you could be lying to us now, telling us you can't lie,’ Sonic said. ‘We're going to need some kind of proof.’

‘We have the Lord-Emperor's sacred copyright symbol on us,’ said the red machine.

Sonic shook his head. ‘No, that won't do.’ He glanced around, and managed to catch Tail's eye. The fox was looking puzzled, but his expression brightened as he noticed the hedgehog pointing discreetly at the time machine.

‘If you really were made by this Lord Emperor chappie,’ Tails said, ‘you'd be able to reprogram his

devices and contraptions, won't you?’

‘Yes,’ said the black and silver dish.

‘Then reprogram our time machine,’ Tails said. ‘Your boss uses one just like it. Set it for — what do you reckon, Captain Orange?’

‘Oh, I don't know,’ Sonic breezed, knowing exactly what he was going to say. ‘Think of a number. How about setting it for four years, five months, fourteen days and two and a half hours in the past?’

‘Very well,’ said the black machine. Its lens lit up with a ruby glow, and a very fine beam of scarlet light struck the time machine in Sonic's paws exactly on its dials. As the hedgehog and fox watched, the circles spun around to a new setting and clicked into place. The beam of light withdrew.

‘Time machine reprogrammed,’ said the black machine.

‘Thanks, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘I think that's all the proof we need. Tell you boss that Sonic and Tails said hi.’

‘Sonic and Tails!’ the machines exclaimed in unison, but it was too late. There was a white flash and a sound of distant thunder and the heroes disappeared, catapulted safely back into the past, and home.

9
AS SURE AS EGGS IS EGGS

With a thump, they landed on soft green grass and lay there for a moment, breathing heavily. White clouds drifted across a cobalt blue sky above them. In the distance came the distant roar of waterfalls and the familiar shouts of the inhabitants of the Green Hill Zone, playing and having fun.

‘Whew!’ Tails said. ‘That was close. Clever of you to think of tricking them into reprogramming the time machine for us.’

‘No problem,’ Sonic said, feeling strangely modest. ‘It was your idea to tell them we Were Fourth Dimensional dudes. Good call, little buddy!’

‘Aw,’ Tails said, blushing slightly. ‘Anyway, we're home now, and that's all that matters. It's a good thing Robotnik hadn't tried to alter this part of the zone's history. We can relax now.’

‘Not quite, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘Still got to sort out the Kintobor/Robotnik thing, remember?’ He sprang to his feet and looked around. The Green Hill Zone looked just as idyllic and peaceful as it always had when he was growing up there, but Sonic knew that there was no time to be lost.

‘Come on, Tails!’ he shouted. ‘We've got five minutes to stop the ROCC blowing up and transforming Kintobor into Robotnik — and the laboratory's on the other side of the zone!’ Tails jumped up and together the two animals shot off across the undulating hillsides, across wooden bridges, over the beaches beside the glittering blue lake, through caves and tunnels, and round some of the special loop-the-loops that Kintobor had constructed for the young Sonic to

exercise his new-found skills and check the friction-reducing powers of his red shoes. Since this was before Robotnik's reign of terror, there were no springs, spikes, traps or manic robots to get in their way, and they powered across the landscape at top speed. The inhabitants of the zone looked up in surprise as the hedgehog and fox zoomed past them.

‘Good afternoon, Sonic!’ called Sally Acorn as the duo sped up to her. ‘Who's your friend?’

‘Can't stop, Sally!’ yelled Sonic. ‘Crucial business!’ They hurtled away.

‘I've just thought, Sonic,’ puffed Tails, struggling to keep up with his hero and friend. ‘Nobody in the zone will know who I am.’

‘It's okay, dude,’ shouted Sonic, twisting his head back to speak to the fox. ‘I'll tell them you're a space alien or a time traveller or from another dimension or something. I know — we'll say you're from a different zone. Hilltop Zone. Hey, we're there.’ He skidded to a halt at the foot of a tall palm tree which stood on the lower slopes of a large hill. Parting the grass and flowers at its base, he revealed a large hole that stretched down into the earth below.

‘Are you sure it's safe? It looks like the burrow of some big, frightening, fox-eating creature,’ Tails asked.

‘Don't be such a wuss,’ Sonic said. ‘I dug this tunnel myself.’ He rolled himself into a ball and dropped out of sight down the hole. Tails followed him and together they rolled down the narrow tunnel, until suddenly Sonic stopped at the end of the passage. It led out into a large brightly lit room filled with flashing machines. In the very centre of the room was a huge machine that towered to the cavern's high ceiling, seemingly built entirely of gleaming, shimmering gold rings which glittered and

spun, held in position by a shimmering force-field that surrounded them.

From the top of the machine rose a pointed tower that ascended into a hole in the roof and, Sonic knew, headed up through the ground and into the Green Hill Zone above. This was the aerial of the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor, which Kintobor had already used to gather almost all the chaos-energy on the planet. It was contained within the six colourful emeralds which were also held inside the force-field's aura, glowing faintly beyond the curtain of gold rings which kept them under control. The whole scene looked very familiar to the hedgehog. He had been here many times before, but not for many years. Well, not since today.

His thoughts were abruptly curtailed as Tails slammed into him from behind, shoving the hedgehog through the tunnel opening and into the room beyond. He picked himself up, grabbed the dazed fox and dragged him behind one of the large machines that stood at the edge of the huge workshop. It was switched off and cool, and there was just enough room for a slim hedgehog and a small fox to squeeze behind it.

‘Why are we hiding?’ hissed Tails. ‘Why don't we just step out and say, “Hey, Kintobor, switch off your machine before it explodes”?’

‘Shhh. It's not as simple as that, dude,’ replied Sonic. ‘Quick, get back.’ A figure was emerging from the far side of the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor: a tall, slim man in a laboratory coat. Thin orange hair decorated his scalp, and he sported a tidy moustache of the same colour on his top lip. Under the white coat he was wearing loose, comfortable trousers and a bright red shirt.

‘Sonic? Did you hear something, old fellow?’ the man asked.

‘He's talking to you — answer him, chum,’ Tails whispered. ‘Who is he, anyway?’

‘That’s Kintobor, dude,’ the hedgehog answered. ‘And he isn't talking to me — look!’

An awesomely familiar blue figure trotted out of a small alcove to one side of the main room. Slim, blue and dynamic, with four smart spikes down his back and a pair of drop-dead red running shoes, there was only one person it could be — Sonic the Hedgehog, version one. Sonic Two, the older version still hiding behind the equipment against the wall, held his breath. He had never quite realised how stunningly good-looking he was, or how staggeringly cool. It was almost intimidating to be confronted by someone that cool, even if it was himself.

‘I didn't hear nothing, dude,’ the new Sonic said to Kintobor.

‘Whoooah!’ Tails breathed.

‘Are you sure? I just heard it again,’ the scientist asked.

‘No way! Don't diss my super-vigilant abilities, dude. How's the programming going?’ Sonic One replied, wandering over to peer at the machine. The older Sonic Two tensed his muscles ready to spring out, but the younger version of himself did not touch the ROCC's control panel.

‘Oh, fine, fine,’ Kintobor answered. ‘Just a few more minutes and the chaos-energy will be safely sealed in here forever, and Mobius will truly be perfect.'

‘Cool,’ the hedgehog breezed. ‘It's snack time. Can I get you something?’ He wandered back towards the alcove he had emerged from and opened the door of a fridge that Sonic Two could just see from his viewpoint. The whole scene was totally familiar. He remembered these moments

as if they were etched into his brain, and he knew exactly what was going to happen next — or what *would* happen if he and Tails did not intervene.

‘The moment's coming, dude,’ he whispered in Tail's ear. ‘When I say go, we go. I'll distract those two and you go for the ROCC. There's two buttons on the control panel: one red and one green. Hit the red one and it'll pause the machine and freeze the chaos inside it. Whatever you do, don't hit the green button.’

Tails nodded silently and Sonic turned back to watch the room. Kintobor had walked back to the controls of the ROCC and was typing more instructions into it. From the alcove came a muffled ‘Peee-yew!’ The fridge door closed with a slam and the younger Sonic walked back out into the main room. He was holding an egg in one paw. Although our Sonic could not tell at this distance, he knew that the egg was hard-boiled, because a few years ago it had been him holding it. Watching this gave him an odd trembly feeling in his stomach. He dropped back into a crouch, ready to leap out into the attack.

The other Sonic walked towards Kintobor. ‘Sure you want to eat this?’ he asked, holding out the egg. Behind him, the ROCC began to pulse with a strange, powerful energy. ‘I think it's —’

‘GO!' yelled Sonic; he leaped out from his hiding place, spinning towards the centre of the workshop. Tails followed a second behind him. Sonic One and Kintobor spun round to look at the new arrivals.

‘— rotten,’ finished the Sonic with the egg. ‘Hey — what's going down? Who are these dudes?’

Sonic Two landed in front of his identical counterpart. ‘I'm you,’ he replied. ‘You're me. We're us. Don't move, anybody!’ He tried to dodge past the younger version of himself, but every time he made a move in any direction,

the other matched it exactly, blocking his path, and Sonic One's reactions were just as fast as Sonic Two's

Suddenly Tails came sailing over their heads, leaping towards the ROCC behind the two hedgehogs and the scientist. Sonic One saw him coming and leaped high into the air, grabbing the fox by one of his red shoes. The two tumbled to the floor in an untidy heap. The egg that Sonic One had been holding was knocked from his hand and went flying, curving across the room - directly towards the ROCC's control panel!

Sonic watched all this - the leap, the fall and the egg - as if it was happening in slow motion. He felt strangely calm and totally in control. As the egg soared in its parabola towards the flashing machine vibrating with chaos-energy, he dropped low, then sprang up into a controlled dive upwards, over the head of Kintobor and over the hedgehog and fox on the floor. The egg began to drop, heading directly towards the large green button in the middle of the control panel below. Sonic stretched out his arm and snatched it out of the air. He hit the floor just beyond the control desk, rolled once, leaped back up and slam-dunked the egg down onto the red button. Rotten yolk and albumen flew everywhere. The ROCC stopped vibrating, and the lights pulsing around it died away, to be replaced by the friendly flickering of the force-field, still holding the rings, emeralds and chaos-energy together.

‘Wa-hey! We did it!’ Sonic cheered.

‘Eeyuurgh!’ revolted everyone else, wiping the remains of the very rotten egg from their faces and hands. Kintobor was the first one to recover.

‘You look just like Sonic,’ he said, ‘but logically you can't be. And I have certainly never seen your friend before.’

‘He's Tails. I *am* Sonic. And you're still Kintobor!’ rejoiced the hedgehog. ‘Doctor K, we saved you from a fate worse than death! We are excellent! Awesome! Bodacious! Like, totally!’ He began moon-walking around the room, body-popping to his own beat, but was interrupted by the scientist.

‘Saved me from what fate, exactly?’ he asked.

Sonic slowed down. ‘Better not say, Doc. Trust me, you wouldn't believe us. Just take it from me, don't switch that ROCC thing of yours back on until you've found the Grey Emerald, OK?’

‘Who is this bogus dude?’ asked the other Sonic, finally freeing himself from Tails's tails, which had wrapped themselves around him in a knot. He stood up and advanced on his duplicate. ‘If he doesn't give us a decent explanation real soon, like right now, I'm going to bash him!’

‘Chill, dude,’ Sonic said, but the other rushed at him, one fist raised. Sonic lifted a paw and caught the fist in mid-air. It felt like he had grasped a handful of putty. It flowed in his grasp, twisting around his arm like a blue liquid.

‘What's happening to him — to them?’ gasped Tails. He and Kintobor watched as the two hedgehogs' bodies seemed to become fluid; sliding, merging and morphing together. Arm joined arm, spikes slid into spikes, four legs became two. In a few seconds only one Sonic the Hedgehog stood in the middle of the room, gazing at his hands with a puzzled expression.

Kintobor stared at the blue hedgehog. ‘If my guess is right,’ he said, ‘my education and research would lead me to conclude that what we just saw was the resolution of a time paradox. The laws of the space and time would not

allow two Sonics to exist in the same place at the same time, so the problem has solved itself by making the two of them into one. That, in turn, leads me to conclude that the two of you have been time-travelling, probably from the future. So Sonic was probably right: it *is* better that I don't know why you switched off my ROCC just now and covered my workshop with rotten egg.'

Tails had understood approximately none of Kintobor's explanation, but if the scientist thought things were fine then Tails thought they were probably fine too. 'Sonic, are you okay?' he asked. The hedgehog looked up from his paws. 'Of course I'm okay,' he said. 'I'm Sonic the Hedgehog, aren't I? And now I'm twice as cool as I was before. Audacious!'

Tails smiled. 'That's the Sonic I know and adulate,' he said. Something dug into his leg, and he felt down, to tug the Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne time machine from where he had tucked it into the top of his running shoes. 'Oh dear,' he said.

'What? Why? What is it?' asked Kintobor, his eyes lighting up.

'Don't worry, Doctor K. It's hero stuff,' Sonic said, walking over and taking the time machine from Tails. 'How did it get this big dent in it?' he asked.

'That's from where I and the other Sonic fell on it,' admitted Tails. 'But I thought it was supposed to vanish when we set everything right.'

'It would have done, dude, if it had been the one that Robo — I mean, the fat guy had invented,' Sonic said, careful not to say the name of his arch-nemesis. Kintobor might seem absent-minded, but even he would recognise his own name backwards. 'But it's the original, so it didn't. Hey Doc!' he called. 'Wanna look after this for us? It's

busted now and you mustn't take it to bits, but it'd look really ace up on your workshop wall.’

‘Very well,’ the scientist said, taking the time machine gingerly from Sonic. ‘I don't suppose you're going to tell me what it is.’

‘No way!’ Tails said. He turned to Sonic. ‘So, it's all over. We saved the Doc and the day. No more villains to beat. What's left for heroes like you and me to do?’

‘Now we wrap this whole thing up,’ Sonic said. ‘We find the Grey Emerald and neutralise all the chaos on Mobius — forever.’

10
LUCK OF THE HEDGEHOG

It was a month later, and Sonic was speeding through the depths of the Mystic Cave Zone, dodging boulders and leaping from creeper to creeper. The Zone was a naturally occurring series of caverns deep under the surface of Mobius, leading from the heights of the Hilltop Zone down to the rocky shores of the blue-green ocean. Kintobor had found the Mystic Caves when he was first exploring Mobius for somewhere to site his workshop and home, but had not explored them completely and had settled instead in the Green Hill Zone. Now Sonic was exploring the depths of the caves in search of the elusive Grey Emerald.

The search was not going too well. The Grey Emerald did not show up on any scientific scanning instruments. This meant that Kintobor, Tails and Sonic had to look for it in person, scanning every metre of ground on, and under, the planet. Kintobor spent most of his time tunnelling through likely veins of underground minerals using his Cogwinder Retractable Particulant Corer, the device he had used to find the first six Chaos Emeralds. Tails spent most of his time in the Green Hill Zone, sunning himself and chatting to babes, who found him irresistible because of his fine, silky coat of fur and those cute twin tails. That left most of the work to Sonic. This didn't really bug him. It was a good chance to get out and keep his legs in shape, and he enjoyed seeing all the zones of Mobius as they were before Robotnik had messed them up.

‘Hoya-hup!’ he exclaimed, leaping over a glow-bug which had appeared out of a patch of overhanging creeper. The bugs were harmless without Robotnik's exterior armour and flashing heat-emitter attached to them, but

leaping over them was fun and they did not seem to mind. But it still didn't feel like hero's work and, if Sonic was honest with himself, neither did searching for the Grey Emerald. It was worthy and important work, but there was no sense of danger, difficulty or derring-do to it. He needed something to get his teeth into, and for once he didn't mean a cheeseburger.

Exploring the whole system of caves did not take long at supersonic speed, and before long he had dashed out into the bright sunlight that poured down from a sky-blue sky onto the deserted rocky shores of what in his original time was Robotnik's foul Oil Ocean. Sonic looked around, breathing in the air and the smell of brine and kelp.

‘The only sort of oil this place will ever see again is sun-tan oil,’ he said to nobody in particular. The waves broke against the stones of the shoreline in a monotonous, unending, slow rhythm which might have felt calming if it had not clashed so violently with Sonic's mood. He was feeling restless; the sort of restlessness that not even a good long sprint would cure. Back in the Green Hill Zone, everyone would be larking around and having fun, and expecting him to show off for them, but after a month of that, Sonic was righteously tired of it. He wanted action and adventure, and he wanted them right now.

‘What's the point of saving the world if nobody knows that you've saved them? And what's the point of saving the world if there's no challenges left once you've done it?’ he asked the sky. Unsurprisingly, the sky did not reply. A lone seagull soared high above. ‘It's OK for you,’ he called, knowing it could not hear him. ‘You've still got places to explore. I've been around the world a million times, and all I find is slime. Robotnik may have been a villain, but at least I was never bored with him around.’ He picked up a stone and hurled it high across the waves, far into the ocean. It skipped once, twice, three times and splashed

from view. Sharp sunlight glinted briefly off the ripples it has made.

A glint in the sky, looking almost like a reflection from the sea, caught the pondering hedgehog's eye, and he looked upwards, trying to focus on it in the glare. With one paw raised to shield and shade his eyes, he could just make out a dark, dart-like shape speeding across the sky, heading higher and further away. A bright flare of flame jetted from its tail end as it soared towards the stratosphere, speeding away with all the apparent effort of the seagull earlier. It was too far away to see any markings on its sides.

‘Wonder who — or what — that was,’ mused Sonic. ‘No dude here's got a rocket, or the science or sense to build one. Except Kintobor, and he's too busy with his Emeralds. Maybe I better head back to the zone. Something in my spikes tells me that there may be trouble brewing. Trouble from outer space, too. This could be bad — so bad, it's good.’

His former disgruntled thoughts vanished, wiped away and replaced by the idea of adventure. Without pausing to look back at the ocean or the sky, he darted back into the entrance to the Mystic Caves. Just inside, almost hidden in the shadows, was one of the network of computer monitors that Kintobor had installed all over the planet, so that anyone who found any trace of the Grey Emerald could report it directly to him. When the ROCC had blown up in the other timeline, the network had crashed. With Kintobor still at the planet's helm, however, the network of monitors was working fine.

Sonic stood in front of the screen. ‘Sonic to Kintobor, come in, Doc K.’ There was no reply. The screen stayed blank and there was no sound apart from the very faint,

very high-pitched whine that all TV sets make. ‘Are you there, Doc? Tails, how about you?’ he asked. Nothing.

Something must have happened! Doctor Kintobor always kept a miniature receiver with him wherever he went, and could pick up an signal even if he was kilometres underground. Sonic though for a moment, his brow furrowed, then ran back out onto the beach. He revved his legs up to full speed until they and he were whirling on the spot like a giant fan, and shot off along the rough shingle. The coastal route was the long way round to the Green Hill Zone, but he did not care. At his speed it would only mean a difference of a few minutes, and he loved the feel of the rushing wind in his face — and the smell of adventure in the air.

A while later, back in the Green Hill Zone, everyone's heads turned as a small, blue and undeniably cool hedgehoggy shape hurtled down hill and up dale, sending a trail of cut grass flying up after its racing paws. It screeched to a halt beside a group of pals who were enjoying the afternoon sun.

‘Good to see you, Sonic. The grass needed trimming,’ Porker Lewis deadpanned. The others tittered behind their paws and wings.

‘He's better than a lawnmower,’ Chirps chirped.

‘All right, calm down. Don't hurt yourselves laughing,’ Sonic said crossly. Since he and Tails had changed time, the guys in the zone seemed to have lost a lot of respect for him. Of course, he told himself, they've never seen me in action. Nothing bad has ever happened here, so I've never had to save them from anything, crack them out of the robot shells where Robotnik had trapped them. Hey, how come I can remember all this when it never

happened? thought the bit of him which was still the other Sonic.

‘Anyone seen Doc K around?’ he asked. ‘Or Tails?’

‘Here I am,’ announced the furry fox, appearing from around a clump of bushes. ‘I've just been to check on the Doc, but he can't be back from his search yet. He certainly hasn't restocked the fridge yet, because it was completely empty.’

‘Come on, Sonic,’ said Porker Lewis. ‘While you're waiting for your pal the prof to get back, how about a game of cards?’ The pig produced a deck of cards from behind his back and deftly flipped, shuffled, cut and dealt them. It was quite a feat of agility, especially considering he was using trotters to do it. Something about the way he manipulated the cards made Sonic think of something out of his past.

That was it! Just before that evil badnik, Robotnik, had captured all his friends and infested the Green Hill Zone and the rest of Mobius with traps, Sonic remembered a game just like this one. It was on an afternoon just like this, too. A curious sensation filled his body, just like the sensation he had felt in Kintobor's workshop as he watched himself. He had heard Kintobor refer to the feeling as a *déja vu*, but he just thought of it as another repeat showing.

‘Okey-dokey,’ he said. ‘What's the game, Porkie? Snap? Racing demon? Pit?’

Sally Acorn looked at him from where she was sitting, and sighed. ‘You know we'll never play those games against you again — you're just too fast. You'd be finishing your third game before we were halfway through the first.’

‘Nope,’ Porker announced, ‘this game is called Twenty-Three, and you have to make the cards in your hand add

up to twenty-three if you can. You get one card to start, and you put down however many jellybeans you think it's worth…'

'Jellybeans?' Tails asked, his eyes lighting up.

Sally passed around small packets of the multicoloured sweets, twenty to each person, as Porker explained the rest of the rules. Everyone had to try to get more on their cards than he did, or their stakes went to him. If their cards added up to over twenty-three, their stakes went to him. If they beat him, or got twenty-three, he paid them.

'It sounds a bit complex for me,' Tails complained; he was distracted by the thought of the sweets.

'You'll get the hang of it,' Porker said, dealing out the first round of cards. Sonic tried to remember exactly what had happened in that far-off game. His first card had been a seven. Or was it a moon? He picked up the card and looked at it. It was a moon, worth ten. He watched carefully as everyone else staked their jellybeans in ones and twos. Tails looked dubious but put down three. The fox had not been in the old game, so Sonic did not know how well he was going to do. Sally put down four.

'Oooh, a big stake there,' Porker said.

Sonic looked at his card again, then at his jellybeans. He picked up a grape one, and almost put it down in front of him as his stake, but at the last minute flicked it into the air and caught it in his mouth.

'Hey! No scoffing the stakes!' Porker commended.

'Chill, dude. I can afford it.' Sonic nonchalantly pushed all the rest of his beans forward. Porker stared hard at it.

'Is there something you're not telling us?' he said.

'Nope,' Sonic said, chewing his jellybean.

Porker shook his head, and dealt out the second round of cards, these ones face up. Sonic got a planet, also worth ten. It was exactly what he remembered, and he remembered what the next few cards were as well. He looked around. Tails had received a two; not a bad card. Sally had a six. Porker had a nine.

‘Sally, you're first,’ said the piggy dealer. ‘Do you want a card?’ Sally nodded, and Porker flipped over a card. It was a nine, landing next to her six.

‘I'll pass,’ she said. Porker turned to Sonic.

‘What for you, mister high roller?’ he asked.

‘I'll take a card, please,’ Sonic said. He was on twenty points already and this was a big risk, but he knew what was going to happen. Porker flipped the card: it was a red star, worth only one. Sonic remembered that card: he saw it perfectly in his mind's eye, as well as the two that followed it in the pack.

‘Nice card,’ Porker grunted. ‘Can I tempt you with another one? I can almost taste your jellybeans already.’

‘Yeah, sure. Give me another card,’ Sonic said. ‘Matter of fact, give me two, just to be on the safe side.’ Porker shrugged his shoulders as if to say, this boy's gone crazy, but he flipped the cards. Two more one-point stars fluttered down to land beside Sonic's other cards. He had twenty-three points.

‘Five card hand,’ Sally gasped. ‘Dealer pays three times if you beat him. Four times if you've got twenty-three.’

Porker guffawed. ‘He'd have started off with twenty points if he had twenty-three now,’ he cried. ‘But only an idiot or a psychic takes more cards when they're on twenty points.’

Sonic said nothing, just smiled. Across the circle of players, he saw Tails giving him a funny look. He grinned back at him.

The rest of the players took their turns. Some of them passed, and some took more cards. Tails went too far, ended up with twenty-six points and surrendered his stake of three to Porker. Finally it was the pig's turn. He turned over his first card, to reveal a three. Three and nine; twelve points. He flipped the top card off the deck and it landed between his others — a sun, worth ten.

‘Dealer has twenty-two,’ Porker announced. ‘I'll pay anyone with twenty-three.’

‘Too high for me,’ said Sally, throwing him her stake. ‘Come on Sonic, give it up. What was your first card? It can't have been worth ten.’

Sonic bent down and slowly turned over his moon. There were gasps from all around the circle.

‘You owe me nineteen-times-four jellybeans, Porkie,’ he said. ‘Seventy-six.’

‘What?’ exclaimed the piggy one. ‘WHAT!? Not fair! I thought we were playing Twenty-Three, not Strip Porker! How on Mobius did you know you'd get three stars?’

Sonic stood up. ‘That'll teach you to have a little respect for your local hero, dude,’ he said, and walked away. Behind him he could hear the argument starting to break out. Porker was claiming he'd been robbed and that Sonic had cheated. Sally Acorn was sticking up for him, saying that it was probably blind luck and bluff. Chirps was saying something about fate, and Flicky the Bluebird was claiming that Sonic must have X-ray eyes and be able to see through the cards. Most of them were saying that they would never play cards against Sonic again. There was no sound of Tails's voice.

‘I know how you did it,’ said a familiar accent at his elbow. ‘You remembered the game from the first time you played it, didn't you?’

‘Yeah, Tails. Smart of you think of it — not!’ the hedgehog replied, walking on towards Kintobor's underground base.

‘Why did you do it?’ the fox asked, running round to be in front of Sonic, and jogging backwards so he could face his friend. ‘The guys will never play cards with you again, or any other game either. That wasn't just showing off, that was arrogance. Something's wrong.’ Sonic said nothing, but kept walking.

‘Come on, Sonic, I'm your best mate. You can tell — Oops!’ Tails said, tripping over a rock and falling flat on his back. ‘Ow!’

In a second Sonic was kneeling beside him. ‘Are you okay, dude?’ he asked. ‘That looked like a bad trip.’

Tails sat up, rubbing his ankle. ‘That sounds more like the Sonic I'm usually proud to call my friend,’ he said. ‘I'm OK, Sonic. I've had worse trips than that. What about you? You sound like you're real down just now.’

Sonic shrugged. ‘It's just — I dunno. It doesn't feel right, having everything this peaceful. It's all very cute and sweet and nice, but I'm used to action and derring-do, snatching victory from the jaws of Robotnik and all that. I'm bored.’

‘Bored?’

‘Bored. Bored, bored, bored, bored, bored. BORED, bored, BORED, bored, BORED. Bored —’

‘I get the picture,’ the fox interrupted. ‘Let's go and see if Kintobor's back yet.’

‘Yeah.’ Sonic's face brightened. ‘Hey, I saw some kind of spacecraft zooming out of the planet's atmosphere. That's what I was going to tell the Doc about. See if he knew what it was.’

‘A spacecraft? Maybe he saw it too — that could be why he scarpered in such a hurry.’

Sonic looked puzzled. ‘He left in a hurry?’

‘Yeah. His workshop's in a terrible mess, you know. Equipment lying everywhere, cupboards and drawers open, some of the machines still on…’

‘Let's go!’ Sonic shouted and dashed off towards the hidden entrance to the workshop. Tails, slightly puzzled, followed him. Together they rolled down the narrow chute, into the middle of the floor of the workshop area, stood up and looked around.

It was a shambles. Bits of equipment were hanging out of open drawers or lying around on work surfaces or on the floor, their wires trailing from them. The desk where Kintobor usually sat and thought, or planned out his next device or expedition, was strewn with his papers, scattered and torn. Some of the machines and monitors against the wall were switched on, their warning lights flashing red and blue as their dials pointed high into the danger zones. Sonic's treadmill, where he had first broken the sound barrier and where, in recent weeks, he had been coaching Tails, was overturned. It did not look as if someone had leftin a hurry. It looked as if a gang of bad mood guys had trashed the place.

Sonic dashed over to one of the monitors on the wall. ‘The Cogwinder Retractable Particulant Corer is still here — Kintobor isn't out on any expedition. Or if he is, he took something different to travel in.’

‘Like a spacecraft, maybe?’ asked Tails.

‘I don't think so. Not his style,’ answered Sonic. Then he saw the ROCC.

The Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor stood where it had always stood, in the centre of the room. Its thousands of glittering chaos-proof rings still hung suspended around it, but the shimmering aura of the force-field which always surrounded them was gone. So were the six regular, geometric, colour-coded shapes of the Chaos Emeralds. The place where they normally floated inside the ROCC's containment field was completely empty.

Sonic and Tails stared at the empty device for a long few silent seconds, then turned to each other. The shock and surprise on Sonic's face was perfectly matched by that on Tails's.

‘You don't suppose…’ Tails started.

‘Suppose what?’ Sonic snapped.

‘That — that Kintobor was using the machine and the accident happened anyway even though we stopped it and he's turned into Robotnik and he's going to trap us down here and turn us into chaos robots?’ asked the fox in a panicked rush. Sonic turned back to look at the ROCC.

‘No,’ he said. ‘If that had happened, the machine would have blown up and we'd have seen the rings raining down all around us when we were outside. Two possibilities, dude. One: he found the Grey Emerald and was so excited he came back here and neutralised all the Chaos Emeralds without telling us.’

‘No way,’ Tails decided. ‘He'd have told us, definitely. That doesn't explain the mess either.’

‘Good thinking,’ Sonic said. ‘So good, it was just what I was thinking too. That leaves the second possibility, which is the bad news one. Someone's taken the Emeralds.

Possibly the dudes in the spaceship, possibly not. They may have taken Kintobor too. They may not.

‘Let's search the place. There may be some clues.’

The two animals set about their search with a vengeance. No scrap of paper was left unturned, no machine left unexamined. Every doorway, tunnel, corridor, air-duct and piece of furniture in the whole place was turned upside down, searched, tapped, turned right-side up again and shaken. There was no sign of Kintobor, or the Emeralds, or any clue as to who might have removed either or both of them. After almost an hour of investigation, Sonic was getting hungry in a big way.

‘I'm getting hungry in a big way,’ he said. ‘Serious snack attack, dude. Major-league rumblage from the stomach zone, you know what I'm saying. I'm gonna do a fridge run.’

‘I told you earlier,’ Tails said, ‘the fridge is empty. There's nothing at all in there. Not even a rotten egg this time.’

‘Okay, I'll do a kitchen run, see what I can find. You want anything?’

‘Anything but an omelette,’ Tails replied as the blue hedgehog dashed back to the kitchen and opened the door of the cupboard next to the fridge. He stared at the contents for a moment.

‘Tails?’ he called.

‘Yeah?’

‘Did you check the cupboard next to the fridge?’

‘Not me.’

‘I think you should have, dude.’ Tails came running. Inside, encased almost entirely in a tight-fitting suit of gleaming black plastic, lay Doctor Kintobor. Someone had

stuffed an apple into his mouth to make a gag. He did not seem to be wriggling much, but he shook his head violently at the pair of heroes.

‘Recognise that suit?’ Sonic asked.

Tails nodded. ‘Suit — stop restraining this poor professor chap,’ he, said quietly. The black plastic flowed away from Kintobor's slim body, down his torso, over his legs and condensed in a round black circle on the floor by his feet. The scientist sat up, and banged his head on the top of the cupboard. He reached up, rubbed his head, then removed the apple from his mouth

‘Thank goodness you found me,’ he said, panting slightly. ‘I've been in there for hours, you know. This band of dreadful ruffians in stretchy black uniforms smashed their way in here, made me stand on that black thing —’

‘It's called a prison suit,’ Sonic said.

‘We'd hoped we'd never see one again,’ Tails said.

‘And then they switched off the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor, stole the Emeralds and stuffed me in here. I really don't know why they wanted them.’

‘What were these black-suited dudes like?’ Sonic asked.

‘Very strange,’ said Kintobor, rubbing his head. ‘Very strange indeed. One of them looked a bit like a horse, but had some kind of horn sticking out of its head. Another was like a human being, only very tall and hairy all over, and he growled a lot. Their leader was most extraordinary. A scaly sort of a fellow, he was, with big claws and golden eyes, lots of teeth and these odd sort of back-projections that didn't seem to really fit into his uniform. Said his name was —’

‘Arctur,’ Sonic said.

‘Arctur the dragonkin,’ Tails added.

‘My word! You've met him, then?’

‘Three times. Three times too many, too,’ Sonic said. ‘Well, and I thought today was going to be just another boring day in paradise.’

11
LARCENY MOST FOUL

‘But what are we going to do?’ Tails repeated.

It was an hour or so later. The two animals had left Doctor Kintobor wandering dazedly around the ruins of his laboratory, tut-tutting over trampled instruments and trying to sort the place out, and had headed out to see if anyone else in the zone had seen anything of the black spacecraft. Sonic felt like a new hedgehog, full of energy. A challenge had presented itself and he was about to rise to it, if only he could think how.

‘Righty-ho,’ he said. ‘The problem needs to be looked at logically. Studied from all sides, analysed, thought about thoroughly by trained minds and all that.’

‘When do we start?’ Tails asked.

‘We don't, we leave that to the Doc,’ Sonic said. ‘He's the resident sitting-and-thinking dude around here. We're the resident rushing-around-and-saving-his-butt dudes. Hope he comes up with something soon.’

‘But why would the mythos creatures want the Chaos Emeralds in the first place?’ Tails wondered.

‘Like I said, leave that to the experts,’ Sonic said. He did not want to admit that he did not have a clue about why Arctur and his cronies might have done what they did, or how they found their way to Mobius, and he quickly changed the subject. ‘Look, there's Porker and Sally. Let's go and see if they saw anything.’

‘Perhaps that's not a good idea —’ started Tails, but as always he was too late: the impetuous hedgehog had already sprinted across the grass to them.

‘Yo, you two,’ he said. ‘Got a question for you.’

‘We know you have,’ said Porker crossly. ‘Here are your flaming jellybeans, and I hope you choke on them. You cheated in that game. We don't know how you did it but it wasn't funny.’ He thrust a bulging bag into Sonic's surprised hands and turned away, about to storm off.

‘No, no, dudes!’ exclaimed the hedgehog. ‘That's not the question. Look, I don't want your jellybeans. I'm not hungry.’ His stomach rumbled loudly, proving him wrong. ‘It's much more important than that.’

Porker and Sally turned back towards him with suspicious looks. ‘What is it?’ Sally asked, her squirrel tail whisking the air, showing how irritated she was. Sonic felt bad: he had not meant to annoy his friends with his card game trick. He took a step forward and held out the bag to Porker.

‘I'm sorry. I don't really want the beans, man,’ he said. ‘It was just — I was feeling weirded out this afternoon, is all. Didn't mean to hack anybody off. Look, take the beans and share them out with everyone. Tell them I'm sorry about mucking up the game. And I wasn't cheating, I swear…’ His voice tailed off. He knew he could not explain how he had done it without giving away the whole secret.

Porker took the bulbous bag, his eyes wide with delight. ‘Are you sure?’ he said. ‘Thanks, Sonic. You're okay, really. I knew you were. It's just that doing stupid things can make people forget that you're their friend, you know?’ He opened the bag and held it out to Sonic and Tails. ‘Go on,’ he said, ‘take a few.’

The two friends each took a pawful of beans. Sonic thrust all his into his mouth at once and chewed them up —he really was very hungry. Tails sorted through the

colours in his hand, chose a pink one and popped it into his mouth.

‘Mmm,’ he grinned. ‘Earthworm flavour. Chewy, yet crunchy.’

Sally Acorn grimaced. ‘You're gross,’ she said.

Porker picked a bean from the bag, threw it up into the air and tried to catch it in his mouth. It bounced off his snout and fell into the grass, lost. ‘Nuts,’ he said. ‘I'd like to know how you do that trick, Sonic. And I'd really like to know how you knew that you were going to get three stars in that game of Twenty-Three. You didn't touch the pack of cards at all. Can you teach me?’

‘Yeah!’ Sonic said, flattered. ‘The bean thing's simple, you just practise a lot. Being really, really cool helps. The card trick — no problem. First you find yourself a Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne ti—’

‘Sonic!’ Tails said. ‘You just gave the beans away; don't give the game away too. Mythos dudes, remember?’

‘Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry Porkie. Another time, maybe,’ Sonic said. ‘Look, about three hours ago, you dudes were hanging around here, right? Did you see or hear anything strange? Bizarre? Truly out-there left-field weirdnessville?’

Their pals looked at each other. ‘Three hours ago?’ Sally asked.

‘Yes, probably about noon,’ Tails said. ‘Before I got back from the Hilltop Zone. My — er, my old home.’ He coughed artificially.

‘I don't think so,’ said Porker. ‘I don't remember seeing anything odd. Can't you even give us a clue?’

‘Dark,’ Sonic said. ‘Sort of dark and slim and rocket-shaped, about eighty metres long and doing about six times the speed of sound. Full of really weird, eerie dudes

in tight black rubbery gear, carrying humungous guns and saying stuff like “Heh heh heh, now at last we possess the means to destroy our enemies and rule the universe, and no one shall stand in our way!” Ring any bells?’

‘Now you mention it,’ said Sally, ‘while I was down at the beach, there was something odd. Not like you describe, though. It was as if this big wind had blown up out of nowhere and sort of zooshed down the lake.’

‘ “Zooshed”?’ Tails asked.

Sally made a sweeping movement with her arm, like something moving very fast. ‘It's the best word I can think of for it,’ she said. ‘Anyway, this thing, wind, whatever it was zooshed down the lake, really fast, making huge waves like some massive boat had gone past at full speed, or Joe Sushi had jumped off the top rock. It sounded like wind, or like you when you're at top speed.’

‘Which way was it heading?’ Sonic asked. Sally pointed over towards the hillock under which lay Kintobor's secret base and laboratory.

‘That way,’ she said. ‘But after it had gone past me, I didn't see or hear any more. None of the guys you were talking about, or any spacecraft or anything like that.’

‘Nor me,’ said Porker.

‘Thanks, guys,’ Sonic said. ‘You've been a help. Really. Catch you later.’ He nodded to Tails, and they headed back in the direction of the underground complex.

‘What do you think?’ Tails said. ‘A sonic boom?’

‘More likely invisibility,’ Sonic said. ‘It's possible — remember that empty robe who was sitting in the Science Council chamber? So these mythos dudes made their ship invisible, flew in, found Kintobor's base —’

‘But how did they ever find the base? Or, for that matter, the planet?’ asked Tails.

‘If they can make an eighty-metre-long rocket invisible, they can probably cross dimensions.’ Sonic frowned, thinking back to his time in the Fourth Dimension. ‘Yeah, they definitely have, because I remember that Grey babe saying that they weren't originally from the Fourth Dimension, they'd invaded it. So — I dunno. Maybe they somehow tracked us through time. Maybe they captured Grey or Orange or Elder Jay and made them tell. And once they'd done that, well, big science isn't my field, but six emeralds packed with all the chaos on a planet would show up on most scanners, I'd have thought.’

‘So they made the ship invisible, landed, tied up Doc K, nicked the Emeralds and scarpered,’ Tails said. ‘Once they'd taken off, they made their ship visible again because they knew nothing could catch them. And you saw them leaving.’

‘Sounds heinously plausible,’ Sonic said. ‘Come on, let's see if the Doc's worked anything out.’

‘Ah, boys. Glad you came back so soon,’ Kintobor said. The scientist was kneeling in the middle of the room beside the overturned body of Sonic's sonic treadmill, his multi-tool in his hand. He bent for a second and the multi-tool whirred as it spun a screw into the bottom of the large machine; then there was a brief flash as it automatically welded it in place.

‘Yo, Doc!’ Sonic said. ‘Didn't find out much, except the mythos things can do tricks with invisibility. Like making their entire spaceship disappear. Hey, man, why are you fixing that?’ He looked around at the rest of the workshop,

which was still in a complete mess, with equipment smashed and scattered over its floor.

‘Because, young hedgehog-me-lad, I am no fool,’ Kintobor said, straightening up and dropping the multi-tool into the pocket of his white laboratory coat. ‘And I'm afraid I have a small confession to make. You know that strange silvery device with the dial and the button you gave me after you burst in here and switched off my Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor?’

‘The Mark-0!’ Sonic exclaimed. ‘Of course! That's the way to save the emeralds and the day and everything. Doc, you'll find this impossible to believe, being a dude of science and all that, but that little silver thing was a genuine bona fide 100 per cent no-joke time machine. And what we told you about it being broken — well, that was a white lie.’

‘Blue lie,’ Tails interrupted.

‘Technicolour lie, whatever,’ Sonic said. ‘We don't know if it was broken or not, all we knew was that it got dented when Tails fell on it. Why did you mention it — don't say it got stolen too?’

‘No, it didn't,’ said Kintobor, picking up a chair from the floor, putting it upright and sitting on it. ‘I have good news for you, and bad news, and a confession too, as I said. The confession is that I knew it was a time machine.’

Sonic and Tails stared at him, their eyes boggling out of their heads. ‘Do what?’ exclaimed Sonic.

‘Strewth!’ exclaimed Tails.

‘But we told you not to touch it,’ Sonic said.

‘On pain of death or something else rather nasty,’ Tails added.

‘Well, I did touch it,’ said Kintobor. ‘I'm a scientist, and meddling with the unknown is my job. Besides, I was as curious as George about it. So I took it apart and studied its mechanism, and worked out how it functioned and what its function was in the first place.’

‘So you can program it? We can use it now?’ Sonic asked breathlessly, hopefully.

‘Unfortunately not,’ Kintobor admitted. ‘That's the bad news. It was broken, quite badly so. Still, I was able to work out the scientific principles behind it. Time behaves much like the normal world around us, only in more dimensions, and working out how to manipulate it is simple so long as you can do transfinite mathematics in your head, and understand the concepts of parallel universes, dimensional slippage, the simultaneous existence and non-existence of certain subatomic particles and the Rule of Twenty-Three.’

‘Sonic knows that one,’ Tails said.

‘But not the others. So you can rebuild the machine then, Doc?’ Sonic asked.

‘No, I'm afraid not. Whoever made this device had access to some very high technology. They've obviously a very gifted designer. My clumsy tools wouldn't have a hope of repairing it, without causing even more damage.’

Sonic looked downcast. He felt frustrated. ‘So what're you saying, Doc?’ he asked. ‘This good news had better be like, totally amazing, you hear me?’

‘I think it is,’ the red-haired professor said with a trace of a smile. ‘Although I can't perform the necessary repairs on your machine, I can take the same principles it uses, or used, and build them into a bigger machine. Such as, for example, this sonic treadmill. In scientific terms, time travel is an amusing trifle and I'd almost forgotten it, but it

was almost the first thing that came into my mind when I wondered how we were going to get the Chaos Emeralds back from those thieves and brigands. So I've made a few modifications to the treadmill, on the assumption you'd agree to help.'

'Yeah? That's a fair assumption, Doc. How's the treadmill gonna work?'

'Simple.' Kintobor stood up, bent over and lowered the cumbersome treadmill so that it lay flat on the floor, right side up. To Sonic and Tails it looked just the same as it always had: a small conveyor belt, two metres long and half a metre wide, on a series of rollers that were held slightly above the floor on a series of feet. On a read-out halfway down, at hand height, was an indicator showing the speed the person running on the treadmill had reached. 'It's not quite finished yet,' continued the scientist. 'I didn't have time for any fancy controls, even if I thought I could duplicate them, which I don't. To go forwards in time, you stand on the treadmill and run like fury in the direction of this red arrow.' He pointed to a recently painted and slightly splodgy arrow on one side of the belt. 'To go backwards, you just run the other way.'

'How fast do we go?' Tails asked dubiously.

'As fast as you like,' Kintobor advised. 'Your running both powers the machine and guides you through time. You should be able to watch the space around you to see how far back you've reached, but if that's not helpful, then read this.' He pointed at the read-out. 'The top line is how far back or forward you are from the time you started, in years, days, hours and minutes. The bottom line is how far you are from absolute zero.'

'Absolute zero?' asked Sonic.

'Sounds ominous,' Tails said.

‘Absolute zero is the Big Bang, the birth of the Universe,’ Kintobor said.

‘What about the Big Burger?’ Sonic said. ‘Those jellybeans hit the spot, but they didn't hit it hard enough.’

‘Splendid idea,’ said Kintobor. ‘You go and find something to eat, and I'll put the finishing touches to the time machine.’ He bent down to the treadmill again, his multi-tool already whirring in his hand.

Not much later, the two pals returned to the laboratory, contentedly chewing on the remains of a large pizza. Sonic offered the last slice to the doctor, who was still hunched over the time-treadmill, as it now was, welding a final piece in place. He looked around.

‘Ah, you're back,’ he said. ‘Just in time. No pizza, not for me. Care for a test-run, Sonic?’

‘No problem!’ Kintobor set the treadmill right way up and the hedgehog leaped onto its belt. He looked at the two read-outs by his right paw. The top was just a line of zeroes, but the bottom one read 17,700,320,154:77:21:04.

‘What's this number?’ he asked.

‘I told you,’ Kintobor said, ‘it's the time elapsed since the Big Bang. But you won't be going that far back.’

Sonic counted the numbers. ‘Seventeen billion years?’ he asked, and whistled out loud. ‘Dude, I see what you mean about not going that far back. I'd be knackered if I ran for that long! So how do I work this thing?’

‘Face the way you're facing now.’ instructed the scientist. Sonic turned around, then turned back when he realised that he did not have to move. ‘Start running. Wait

for the first number on the top row to change from zero to one, then stop. Don't run too fast.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because running on a full stomach gives you indigestion and wind. Now go.’

‘Now?’

‘Now!’

Sonic started jogging at a leisurely pace. Almost immediately the last digit on the top row flickered and changed, but nothing else had happened. ‘That's no good,’ he told himself, and jogged on. The number flickered on: two, three, four. Out of the corner of his eye. Sonic saw Tails flicker too. He stopped immediately.

‘What happened?’ he asked his furry friend. ‘You flickered.’

‘You vanished!’ Tails wailed in a high-pitched voice. ‘You completely disappeared for four whole minutes. I was really worried, Sonic!’

‘Four minutes? Whoooah, sorry dudes.’ Sonic said, ‘I thought this thing wasn't working, so I kept going. You flickered, so I stopped.’

‘Me? I just scratched my ear,’ the fox replied in a hurt tone.

‘Ah, but you *saw* it as a flicker,’ Kintobor explained, ‘because Tails's movement, which must have lasted maybe ten seconds, was to you a split-second flash, because you were moving forward in time much faster than we were.’

‘You were moving in time?’ the hedgehog asked bewildered.

‘Of course. We all do. It's called “living” and “getting older”. Now, I think we can judge the trial run a success. I

say! “Trial run”, that's rather good, isn't it? Come on, you two, give me a hand with getting this contraption outside.’

‘Why outside?’ Sonic asked.

‘Because if you're going back to the moment before those ruffians appeared, you can't use it in here. If you did, you'd appear in the workshop while I was still here, and since I didn't see you here last time, you'd be altering time, and that's always a bad idea.’

‘But we're going to alter time anyway!’ Tails said, surprised.

‘Not necessarily. Just because Sonic saw a black spaceship flying away from here does not mean that it had the Chaos Emeralds on board it. Nobody else saw them arrive or leave, am I right? In our timeline, you could easily have attacked them, taken the Emeralds, jumped on the treadmill and come back here, a few minutes from now. You might have, you might not, but we don't know. It's what we scientists call an uncollapsed probability wave. Whatever you do, don't change history if you can help it, by shouting to your friends or anything like that.’

Sonic picked up his end of the time treadmill. Together they struggled and heaved it up the narrow tunnel to the outside world. Finally it lay on the grass outside the tunnel entrance, in the shade of a palm tree, and the three figures stood around it.

‘So who goes?’ asked Sonic.

‘You two,’ said Kintobor. ‘There isn't room for me, and I don't have the speed or stamina to keep up with your running. You'll need to run until the dial shows you've gone back…’ He checked his watch. ‘Three hours and forty-two minutes. That should be just after that spacecraft lands, but before it takes off. Best of luck, chaps.’ He

shook them both by the hand and stepped back. Sonic and Tails stepped onto the treadmill and prepared to run.

‘No! No! Not that way! The other direction — against the arrow,’ shouted Kintobor. The animals turned around.

‘Now?’ Tails asked.

‘Let's,’ Sonic said, and started trotting. It was a little difficult to run at the same speed, like running in step, but they soon got it right. The numbers on the read-out sped backwards.

Sonic looked around him. At first it seemed as though nothing was happening, until he noticed the leaves of the palm tree above them, which were thrashing about as if a huge storm was blowing, although he knew that the wind had not been stronger than a slight breeze all afternoon. Clouds whipped across the sky, billowing and furling like huge sheets. The sun started moving backwards, up towards the acme of the blue sky.

‘It's working!’ he called back.

‘Brill! I feel younger already,’ came Tails's response from behind him. ‘I'm glad Kintobor finally explained how all this time-travel malarkey works. I just wish I'd understood a word of what he was saying.’ The read-out moved on: minus three hours twenty, then thirty. Suddenly in front of them was a flurry of activity. They saw black-suited figures milling around, moving backwards, being attacked by two familiar figures, one blue, one orange, also moving backwards.

‘It's us! How are we doing?’ Tails wondered.

‘Keep running, we're almost there,’ Sonic replied. The numbers flickered on. Three forty one, forty two. ‘Stop!’ he called, and they both screeched to a stop.

‘I don't get it,’ Tails said. ‘Where's the ship?’

‘I dunno,’ Sonic said, stepping off the treadmill and straight into an invisible wall. His face flattened against it. ‘Yowch! By dose!’

‘What is it?’

‘Big and invisible — it must be their ship,’ Sonic replied. Looking down, he could see a long mark on the grass where something had flattened it — and, he assumed, was still flattening it. He felt the flat surface in front of him, and his fingers found a protrusion. He pushed it. With an invisible hum, something invisible slid into the side of the invisible ship, revealing a very obvious starship airlock entrance in front of them. The inner door was already open, revealing a corridor stretching into the ship.

‘Whooah! Karmaville. Do we go in, or do we go in?’ he asked.

‘There's no sign of the mythos creeps yet,’ Tails said. ‘Let's go in.’

‘Good plan,’ Sonic said, leading the way. The inside of the ship was made up of unpainted metal girders covered in ducts and cables, with suspended walkways that clanged and echoed as they headed into the interior. Bare neon tubes hung from bare cables, throwing a stark white light which left few shadows.

‘Let's take a left here,’ said Tails.

‘Why left?’ asked Sonic.

‘If the ship came zooshing over the lake to land, like Sally said, that means its nose must be pointing north, and the bridge will probably be that way,’ Tails said.

‘Awesomely good thinking,’ Sonic congratulated him, turning left. As they headed further into the ship, the bare corridors became plusher. Panels covered the walls and the lights were shielded and less harsh. At the end of the

wide corridor was a closed door. Sonic stepped forward and read the plaque on it. It said: ‘Bridge. Only mythological creatures within. By order.’

‘Do they really think that'll stop us?’ Sonic said, and gave the door a good boot. It flew open, slammed into a wall, and alarms started going off, filling the ship with wailing sirens and flashing red light. ‘Bogus,’ he said.

‘Still time for a quick look-round,’ Tails said, diving through the door. The bridge was deserted, but its many complex instrument panels flashed with inexplicable lights. One console, to one side of the others, looked as if it had been recently installed. Every button, dial and light was labelled, but the fox could not read the language they were written in.

‘It's Greek,’ he said. ‘Or at least, it's all Greek to me.’

‘Here's something that isn't,’ Sonic said, brandishing a large folder with the words ‘Secret Plans: Captain's Eyes Only’ on it. ‘Nice of them to make it obvious for us.’

‘Come on, let's get out of here before those imaginary enemies of ours come running.’ They set off at a sprint down the corridor, turned right where they had turned left last time, and shot out of the spacecraft's hatchway — straight into the oncoming forces of fantasy. There were seven mythos creatures. Six were carrying Chaos Emeralds, and the seventh carried a large gun. It was Arctur.

‘Ah! The rats heard us coming and want to rescue their precious treasures, do they?’ he boomed. ‘They shall not succeed! Heh heh heh! Now at last we possess the means to destroy our enemies and rule the universe, and no one shall stand in our way!’ He did not seem to have spotted the time-treadmill under the tree.

Sonic turned to Tails. ‘I *said* he'd say that. Bad guys are so predictable!’

‘Predictable or not, you spiky moron, you and your ilk are doomed!’

‘I'm a fox, not an ilk,’ Tails shouted, but Arctur was already drawing a sleek black pistol from a concealed sleek black holster in his sleek black uniform. In one movement Sonic threw the folder of plans to one side and leaped into the air, spinning and twisting to gain as much speed and power in the shortest possible time. He sped towards Arctur, but the dragonkin saw him coming and dodged sideways with reactions faster than his large size would suggest. Tails, too, leaped into the attack, whirling like a dervish. Some of the mythos soldiers dropped the Emeralds they were carrying and lunged for their guns, while others just dropped, having been solidly smacked in the head by either a hurtling hedgehog or a flying fox.

The two heroes bounced between bad guys. Wham! Sonic slammed off the helmet of another mythos creature — something with two heads, judging by its double helmet — spun up into the air, bounced down onto its other helmet and shot away as the creature crumpled to the ground, the Emerald it had been carrying rolling harmlessly away. Sonic flew through the air, grabbed the branch of a nearby tree and used it to flick himself back into the fray, leaping high and spinning, to descend onto the dark helmet of a soldier below him. The helmet cracked and split open like a conker under the force of his impact, and a second later Tails spun in from another direction to whack the rocky head below a solid belt. The soldier collapsed, the pistol it had been holding flying up into the air. Sonic angled himself off the stomach of a large creature — a white or possibly pink elephant, judging by

the tusks — and shot towards it, to snatch it at the apex of its flight.

He spun down, slamming into the helmet of a short, ape-like creature, which collapsed, and bounced off, to the ground. Around him, the grass was covered with fallen mythos creatures, either unconscious or groaning and holding their heads, and six Chaos Emeralds gleamed where they had landed. With a plop, Tails dropped from above to land beside him, and picked up another gun from a fallen soldier. Ahead of them, Arctur was aiming his laser pistol at Sonic, but the expression on his face showed that he was not too confident about using it.

‘Don't make me use it,’ he warned unconvincingly.

‘Drop it,’ Sonic warned back. ‘You can't use it. Shoot either of us, and the other will fill you full of laser holes. We still get the Emeralds. We win.’

‘How can you fill someone with holes?’ Tails considered. ‘You have to fill things with something, and holes are nothing. You could empty him full of holes, I suppose.’

Something went ‘Zoosh!’. Sonic looked at Tails.

‘Kintobor warned you about eating and running, dude,’ he said. ‘Now you've got wind.’

‘It wasn't me,’ Tails said indignantly, looking around.

‘ “Zoosh?” Didn't Sally — Awk!’ He pointed to the lake.

Coming towards them across the lake, spreading a wake of high waves after it as it hurtled metres above the water, was an enormous black spacecraft, needle-thin and vicious. If spacecraft had teeth, this one would have been armed to them. Sonic realised with a sudden start that it was exactly like the spacecraft he had seen leaving Mobius earlier that day. No, he thought, checking the position of the sun in the sky, leaving Mobius right about now.

‘Two spacecraft, one invisible and one not. Nuts,’ he said.

‘One spacecraft,’ Arctur said.

‘You what?’ Sonic gaped at him.

‘That's my spacecraft,’ the dragonkin said, clearly as surprised as Sonic was. Above them. the huge rocket slammed to a standstill, hovering with a heavy, menacing roar from its engines. Every gun on the underside swivelled to point at the small group on the ground below. Over the noise of the engines, a familiar voice boomed from concealed loudspeakers.

‘DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND SURRENDER TO ARCTUR, VERMIN!’ it boomed.

‘Who's that flying my ship?’ Arctur demanded.

‘IT'S ARCTUR, YOU IDIOT,’ boomed the voice. ‘THE ARCTUR WHO EXISTS TEN MINUTES IN YOUR FUTURE! NOW PICK UP THE EMERALDS AND GET YOUR CREW BACK ON BOARD SO YOU CAN TAKE OFF AND COME BACK TO SAVE YOURSELF!’

Tails looked at Sonic. ‘They've got time-travel too,’ he whispered. ‘Do we drop our guns?’

‘Yes,’ Sonic said, dropping his. ‘You know what this means? Everyone in the zone will have seen that ship arriving, so they've changed the timeline. Just what Kintobor told us not to do.’

Arctur, meanwhile, had been gathering up his crew and the Chaos Emeralds, all the time keeping a careful eye and a gun on the two heroes. As they retreated into the ship, he looked back at them.

‘I sincerely hope this is the very last time we meet,’ he hissed. ‘You two have caused me quite enough trouble as it is. Still, you are stranded here now. Do not hope for help

from your friends in the Fourth Dimension, because very shortly they shall cease to exist. And as for you and your ugly little world,’ he paused, and spat onto the grass outside the hatchway, ‘I shall ensure that, like everything else, you will go out with a very big bang.’

The hatch closed and, as Sonic and Tails watched, the outline of the ship slowly appeared, growing darker and darker until its glossy black shape was solid and complete. looming over them. With a whine of engines it lifted into the air and began to accelerate away. As it disappeared over the horizon, Arctur's cruel laughter boomed once more from the speakers on the other ship, and a bright spear of flame shot from its rear end. With a roar and a boom, it lanced up into the bright sky, growing smaller until it disappeared, taking with it the six Chaos Emeralds and Sonic and Tails's last hopes.

12
INFINITY IS NICE, BUT I WOULDN'T WANT TO LIVE THERE

As Sonic jogged back to the near future, the folder of secret plans under his arm, thoughts whirled around his head. If the mythos creatures had time-travel devices, how had they got them, and what did they intend to do with them? Why did they need the Chaos Emeralds? Had the Fourth Dimension already fallen to the imaginary invaders and, if so, what hope remained for the rest of the universe?

More importantly, he knew that the sudden appearance of the duplicate Arctur's duplicate ship must have changed the history of the timeline in which he and Tails were now travelling. That means that, with the past altered, the future they were returning to might be radically different to the one they had left. Anything could have changed.

‘Hey!’ Tails said from behind him. ‘I've had a thought. Why didn't we stay where we were, free Kintobor and get him to tell us what to do next?’

‘Because we'd have had to explain everything to him,’ replied Sonic. ‘Our Kintobor already knows what's going down. Hang on, we're here.’ The figures on the time treadmill's read-out clicked back to zero.

Kintobor was waiting for them. ‘Where have you two been?’ he asked. ‘I expected you back almost two hours ago. You must have gone too far forward in time.’

Sonic looked at Tails. ‘No way!’ he exclaimed. ‘We came back to the moment we left — three hours and forty-two minutes out, three forty-two back, right Tails?’

‘Yeah!’ affirmed the fox.

‘But why go back so far?’ asked the baffled scientist. ‘I told you to go back one hour and fifty-five minutes, which would have brought you out just by the landed spacecraft, before the second one appeared.’

‘Gotcha, Doc!’ Sonic exclaimed. ‘They changed the timeline on us. In *our* history, there was only one spacecraft, and it took us a while to find you. See, the second spacecraft was actually the first spacecraft which took off and then came back in time to when it was still landed…’ He stopped for a moment, realising how little sense that sentence made. ‘Anyway, that changed history, so in this new history the old “us” must have found you earlier, and gone back in time quicker. Look, dude, we didn't know things would be changed. Nobody's fault.’

‘I see,’ Kintobor said. ‘So, did you get the Emeralds?’

‘Nope,’ Sonic admitted. ‘We almost did, then the second ship appeared and was going to blast us off the planet unless we gave them back. So we did. But we got this.’ He handed him the file of secret plans. ‘I did take a dekko at them, but they're full of big numbers and weird science stuff. It's all geek to me,’ he said.

Kintobor took a large piece of paper out of the file, spread it on the work surface in front of him and stared at it for fifteen seconds. Then, with surprising speed, he dashed over to one of the cabinets that stood against the walls of his workshop, threw open the door and started hunting amongst the junk inside it. Evidently he had put his two hours of waiting to good use, tidying up the damage that the mythos army had caused.

‘What's up, Doc?’ Tails asked.

‘Bad. Very bad,’ the doctor replied as small items and machines slipped off the shelves as he scrabbled among them. In a moment he had found a small device about the size of Sonic's clenched fist, and held it up.

‘Sonic, take this outside now and clamp it to the read-out on the treadmill,’ he said.

‘What is it? Looks bogus to me,’ said the hedgehog curiously, taking the device.

‘It's a micro force-field generator. It'll produce enough of a shield to protect you and Tails from the airless vacuum of space.’

‘Doc,’ Sonic said, ‘I understand you've been through a lot in the last hour, but that's no excuse for gibberish. Slow down and tell us what's going on.’

‘No time! No time!’

‘We can't do anything unless you tell us what to do, and we won't do it unless you tell us why,’ said the hedgehog, crossing his arms. A lot had happened in the last few hours, and while he realised that the scientist was probably panicked about something, that would not do himself and Tails any good.

‘I'll tell you as we move,’ Kintobor insisted. ‘Come on, go! Go, go go!’ The three of them headed for the tunnel entrance, Sonic and Tails speeding ahead of the panting scientist.

‘So what's going down?’ asked Sonic, giving his unfit mentor a hand up the steep slope.

‘The mythos forces are trying to create a new universe where they will be in control,’ said Kintobor, puffing slightly.

‘But that's good!’ Tails said. ‘A new universe means they won't bother the old one any more.’

‘Ah, that's the problem,’ Kintobor said, hauling himself out of the top of the tunnel and into the fresh air and sunlight of the Green Hill Zone. ‘They're not building a new one, they're changing the old one. Completely. Not just a respray: this is a total make-over.’

‘Ouch! Grody to the max! How are they gonna do that, dude?’ Sonic asked.

‘Well… You remember that dial on the read-out which I said you wouldn't actually use much?’

‘The seventeen billion years since the Big Bang one, yeah?’

‘You're going to use it now, and you're going to have to take it right back to zero. That's where your friend Arctur and his ship are headed, according to their plans and charts,’ Kintobor said. ‘And they're going to try to alter the nature of the Big Bang itself, by changing the nature of all existence — of everything, everywhere, in the entire universe — with chaos from the most concentrated source they knew of: the Emeralds.’

‘Is that bad?’ Tails asked.

‘What he means is: how bad is that?’ corrected Sonic.

‘Worse than you or I can possibly imagine,’ Kintobor said. ‘Think of every single particle in the universe, every atom of every sun, every molecule of every planet, every fibre of every living thing, every element, every compound, all infected and tainted by the stain of chaos. We simply cannot begin to imagine what that might do. You have to stop it.’

‘How?’ Sonic asked.

‘If you get back to the Big Bang before they do, you may stand a chance. Try to get the Emeralds and bring them back here. Whatever you do, don't destroy them there, or the chaos will infect the creation. And remember, you only get one chance at this. If the Big Bang gets changed, you won't be able to zip back and try to save it again, because you will have changed too.’

Tails stared at Kintobor, and shivered at the thought. Sonic's brow was furrowed with worry. ‘How are we going to get there first?’ he asked. ‘If they went straight there after they left Mobius, they'll have been travelling for almost four hours now. And they've got a huge spacecraft, while we've just got this piddling little treadmill.’

Kintobor looked at Sonic. ‘This is where you prove yourself Sonic. Are you really the fastest living creature in existence, as you claim? Prove it. Get on that treadmill and run as if your life depended on it. Even if you don't succeed, you have to try. To give up now and wait for the universe to change to its chaotic opposite around us just wouldn't be —’

‘It wouldn't be heroic, dude,’ Sonic completed. ‘Come on, Tails.’ The two animals leaped onto the treadmill. Sonic snapped the small device that the scientist had given him onto the read-out, and Kintobor flicked a switch on it. With a glimmer, a thin force-field sprang up around the treadmill, cutting the two heroes inside off from the world around them. Kintobor stood back and waved.

‘It's universe-saving time. Ready?’ Sonic said. ‘Set. *GO!*’

Together he and Tails began sprinting on the treadmill. Outside the faint haze of the force-field Kintobor stopped waving, spoke for a second to a small blue hedgehog and an orange fox, then they all disappeared down into the tunnel. The sun moved slowly backwards across the sky as

clouds boiled and steamed across its blue surface. A huge black starship appeared above them momentarily, then people were battling around them, their movements insanely fast. They flickered and vanished.

‘Faster!’ Sonic gasped.

The sun lowered towards the eastern horizon, the sky darkening to a deep blue-black. Stars appeared like tiny light-bulbs being switched on. Mobius's moon, a thin crescent, scudded across the sky. The stars winked out and the sky in the west lightened.

‘Come on!’ Sonic said.

The sky was a mass of flickering white clouds and blue patches, behind which the sun shot from one horizon to the other. Darkness fell; the moon followed the sun, and set. The sun appeared.

‘Sunrise,’ Tails panted.

‘Sun*set*. We're going backwards, remember. Less talk, more speed!’

The sunset-red sky became blue, then red again as the sun lowered over the other horizon. Night flickered past, then another day. The numbers on the read-outs sped backwards, the section for minutes moving so fast that it was unreadable. Soon the section for hours followed it into blurred abstraction. The moon rose, full now, and set immediately. Days and nights chased each other, flicking between darkness and light so fast that the scene outside the force-field resembled an ancient black and white film, jerky and imprecise. The leaves on the trees shrank back into the trunks, the trees were dusted with snow, then suddenly had a full growth of leaves which turned from brown and gold to green as they watched.

‘Faster!’ roared Sonic.

The flickering of days and nights blurred into a consistent greyness around the speeding time treadmill. The trees shrank down to saplings. Fallen trees gained roots and stood up, to immediately begin shrinking. The heroes' feet pounded the treadmill at a lightning pace. In the distance, the level of the lake rose and fell, and the shape of the land rose and fell with it. Snow and ice covered the ground, filling the valley, then disappeared. New forests carpeted the hills, changing and moving their outlines, filled with huge new trees that neither animal had seen before. Fat rivers appeared in deep valleys, then shrank as the valleys filled with earth. In the far distance, a huge mountain appeared, a column of smoke and fire spouting from it, then was gone. The shapes of mighty reptiles flickered momentarily around them, and were gone. The special-effects budget for all this must have been astronomical.

‘How far back are we?’ Tails asked.

‘Don't worry. Keep going!’ Sonic panted.

‘I can't. I'm beat. I need a rest. You run for a bit, then I'll take over.’ Tails stepped off the spinning belt, balancing himself on the side of the machine. Sonic's legs sped on. On the read-out, centuries flickered away in the blink of an eye, and as he hit full speed, the digit representing thousands of years began to spin backwards so fast that the eye alone was not enough to keep up with it. Head down, arms pumping like the pistons of a mighty engine, sinews taut and every muscle tense, his face tight with the strain of keeping such a killing pace going, Sonic pushed himself to his absolute limit.

Outside, the flickering grass began to die away, leaving patches of earth, sand and bare rock. The sky became bluer for a moment, then darker. Volcanoes sprang up around them, belching smoke into the atmosphere. The

rock under the treadmill melted to become a huge pool of lava, then solidified. The planet outside the force-field was unrecognisable as Mobius. The sun seemed bigger and redder than before. No living thing moved or grew; only the contours of the rocks around them changed.

This was awesomely mind-boggling, but back and further back they went. Huge craters pitted the landscape, and then with a lurch, the ground melted and disappeared, to be replaced entirely by a sea of bubbling molten rock as far as their eyes could see. Sonic dashed on.

Without warning the planet fell apart under them, becoming gassy and diffusing into the darkness of space. In the distance, the white-hot ball of the sun, not rising and setting around them any more, was beginning to do the same.

‘What's happening?’ panted Sonic. ‘Take over, dude. Take over!’ Tails leaped to the treads and within two or three steps was back into the rhythm. Sonic stepped back, leaning against the read-out for support.

‘I never thought I'd feel this tired,’ he said ‘What happened, dude? Where did the planet go?’

‘The solar system disintegrated around us,’ Tails said breathing heavily. ‘What does the read-out say?’

Sonic bent to look. ‘We're back in time about four-point-six billion years. Four-point-seven now,’ he said. ‘Whoooah! Did I run that far?’

‘Yup,’ Tails said, running on. ‘That's the rough date of the formation of the sun and its planets.’

Sonic looked at him.

‘You know a lot about this stuff for a little fox,’ he said.

‘Saw… the movie…’ Tails gasped. He put his head down and his feet sped up. His pace was not as fast as

Sonic's, but the dials were now counting back in millions of years. Around them in the darkness of space, massive stars blazed, boiled, and hurtled around them.

After the read-out had clocked another three billion years, Sonic took over again, while Tails caught his breath and rested his legs. Then, once he got tired, the fox resumed the running. There were only a billion and a half years still to go now.

Sonic unlaced his shoes and slid his feet out of them, wiggling his toes to restore feeling to them. The constant pounding against hard metal made them numb and uncomfortable. Then he picked up his shoe and examined it.

‘Yo, Tails,’ he said. ‘No, don't answer, keep going. But you ought to know my sneakers are getting seriously worn. Another few million years and there'll be a hole in the sole. Hope we get back to the Big Bang thing before they go bang.’

Suddenly, hanging beside them in the void, was the black needle of Arctur's spaceship. It was probably half a kilometre or so away but was drifting closer. Its glossy black shape glistened in the light from a ball of blazing gas which hurtled past them. More and more were shooting past, all headed for the same point in space: a single bright point, millions of kilometres away. A huge nebula of gas surrounded it filled with shimmering objects and proto-stars. It looked as though the time-treadmill and Arctur's ship were being drawn towards it.

‘We've caught them!’ Tails panted. ‘Do we attack?’

‘We can't,’ Sonic said. ‘If we stopped to leave the force-field. they'd just zoom ahead of us and would get to the Big Bang first. Here, let me help.’ He slipped onto the treadmill and powered ahead, his legs giving the tiny platform an extra boost. The black spacecraft did not

flicker and vanish: it seemed to be keeping up with them, and it was definitely getting closer. Now only a hundred metres, now seventy, now fifty.

Sonic glanced down at the read-out. ‘Only twenty-three million years to go, dude,’ he cautioned. The black bulk of the spacecraft dominated their view outside. ‘I say if we get close enough to Arctur's wagon out there, we get in it. Otherwise there's no way that we could get to the Emeralds.’ Tails, his frantic pace slightly slowed, nodded his assent.

The two craft drifted ever closer, the small one drawn towards the larger as if by magnetic attraction. Finally, with only two thousand years still to travel, the ships bumped together with the slightest of impacts. The treadmill's force-field seemed to penetrate into the hull of the other ship, forming an airtight bond with it.

‘Awesome! Cool steering, too, because that entrance is only about five metres away,’ Sonic said. He put a paw on the glossy black surface of Arctur's ship, and found it strangely warm. By grabbing rivets, welding joints and handholds on the ship's surface, he dragged the time treadmill over the hull until it rested exactly by the airlock entrance they had used earlier. He punched the button beside it, and the outer door slid open noiselessly.

‘Okay,’ he said, glancing at the fox who, face flushed, was still jogging frantically on the treadmill. ‘You keep going until I shout stop, little dude, but get ready to restart if I tell you.’ He flipped himself over the edge of the treadmill and, still surrounded by the pale glow of the force-field, his feet made contact with the edge of the airlock door. Sonic tugged the treadmill and it slid effortlessly and weightlessly into the airlock.

‘Stop!’ he shouted, and waited in case the black ship flickered and vanished around them. It did not. ‘Good,’ he

said. Tails collapsed against the read-outs, completely exhausted, as Sonic punched the button to close the outer door of the airlock, and then switched off the treadmill's force-field. It died away. They were surrounded by the warm, slightly stale smell of the spacecraft's artificial atmosphere. The lights glared brightly, and there was an odd hum in the background.

‘Okay, we're inside,’ he said. ‘Pull yourself together, Tails. We haven't got to the tough bit yet. Come on.’ They stepped out of the airlock together, and Sonic punched the button to close the inner door. It slid shut, hiding the time machine in the airlock. The two friends headed off down the corridor they had explored earlier, and predictably came to the same junction.

‘Toss for it?’ Tails asked. ‘Bridge or the great unexplored?’

‘I say bridge,’ Sonic decided. ‘It's gotta be the most important place on the ship. Even if the Emeralds aren't there, the controls for dropping them into the Big Bang, or whatever they're planning to do, will be. And Arctur too. I've got a bone to pick with him. Let's see him fly back in time and save himself now!’ They turned left. As before, the corridor was deserted, and the door to the bridge at the end was closed. It still had the imprint of Sonic's shoe on it.

‘Aw. That marks looks so lonesome,’ he said, preparing to kick the door open again, then raised a hand.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘That humming's stopped.’ Tails cupped a paw to his ear. He was right: the ship was now completely silent. ‘I think we've arrived, Sonic said, and slammed his foot into the door. It flew open, crashing once more into the wall behind it. The two heroes burst in, to find six or seven figures in dark suits staring intently out of the forward viewscreen at an intense point of light

somewhere ahead of them. Arctur turned to face them. His scaly face cracked into a smile, his sharp teeth gleaming in the harsh white light from the object ahead of them.

‘Our visitors are here,’ he said. ‘So glad you could make it.’

Tails was taken aback for a moment. ‘You were expecting us?’

‘Not exactly, no,’ said Arctur. ‘I thought we had stranded you safely on that dirtball you call Mobius, but we noticed your little device floating outside. Most ingenious of you. Can I offer you a glass of something?’ He moved over to a dispenser on the wall, took a plastic cup of something from it and sipped it.

‘No!’ Sonic shouted. ‘Cease whatever you're doing, or we trash this place so good that you'll be stuck here when the Big One goes fireworks. Don't release the Emeralds!’

‘My dear — Sonic, isn't it? My dear Sonic, do you really think we would let you interfere, after we came so far? For my entire life, the entire life of my entire race, the lives of all the races on this ship and many thousands besides, we have been hunted and harried by those morons from the Fourth Dimension, who insist that we should not exist, and are determined to see that we don't. They may be rotten at catching time criminals, but they're very good at finding us. So finally we realised that the only way for us to be able to live in peace would be to live in a universe with no Fourth Dimension. That is why we stole your emeralds and that is why we - and you - are here: to create such a universe, by altering the nature of its creation with those Emeralds that one of our spies overheard you discussing with your friend Jay. And nothing you can do can stop us. Destroy our ship, kill us all; we would gladly sacrifice ourselves if it means that in doing so we create a place where our kind can live safely.’

‘We're not going to kill you,’ Sonic said. ‘We're not that sort of heroes. Just step away from the instruments, so you can't release those Emeralds into the Big Bang.’

‘Sonic, Sonic, Sonic,’ said Arctur. ‘Think about it. Would I be telling you all this if there was still a chance you could stop us? The bright light you see out there is the Primal Particle, about thirty-two million kilometres away. It will explode to form the universe in about —’ He checked his watch. ‘— Three minutes. At the moment it is quite stable, and might have remained so, but it will explode because the Chaos Emeralds hit it, pushing it into instability, and an entirely new, chaotic universe will be created.’

‘Not if we can help it!’ Tails shouted. He could not understand why the dragonkin was so calm about everything. Arctur smiled and continued.

‘But you can't help it, Sonic. You see, we fired your precious Emeralds at the prime particle two minutes ago, before you ever arrived on the bridge. They're flying towards it now, probably at a speed nearing that of light, sucked in by its almost infinite gravity. It's taking all our power just to stop being sucked in ourselves. Whatever you do will not save your precious future now.’

Tails's mind whirled. He wanted to smash Arctur's smug face, but that would not solve anything. Part of his mind wondered briefly whether it would be possible to somehow time-travel away and then back, to get to this moment earlier, but then he remembered Kintobor's words of warning about the Big Bang: if they got it wrong, there would be no chance for a second try. They had given it their best shot, and they had failed. Suddenly he felt very tired indeed.

Someone tugged at his arm. It was Sonic. ‘Come on!’ he yelled, half-dragging the stunned fox off the bridge and

into the corridor outside, slamming the door behind him. He broke into a run, heading back towards the airlock.

‘What's the point?’ Tails moaned, not moving. Then the door behind him was knocked off its hinges as Arctur and three of his security troops burst through, brandishing their laser pistols, and Tails decided that whatever the hedgehog was up to, it was better than hanging around. He set off after his friend, laser bolts sizzling the air around him.

Sonic sprinted back towards the airlock. He punched the button to open the inner door, and was scrambling onto the time-treadmill as Tails caught up with him.

‘Close the door and get on,’ Sonic shouted. Tails did as he was told. The door slid closed, and then began to slide open again as Tails leaped onto the treadmill. Sonic punched the button for the force-field and it flickered into life, just as the airlock door opened and Arctur and his troops blasted the treadmill and the two animals on it with all the laser-fire they could concentrate. The bolts bounced harmlessly off the force-field, bursting against the walls of the airlock in a spray of bright colours.

‘OK! Now *run!* Run like everything in the entire future depends on it,’ Sonic instructed.

‘Which way — and why?’

‘Forwards, now! Come on!’ Tails reluctantly started trotting forward, but found that he had to speed up immediately or his feet would have been swept away by the sprinting pace set by the hedgehog running in front of him. Around them, the airlock and the rest of Arctur's ship flickered and vanished, disappearing into the past. The numbers on the read-out began to flicker and move forward.

‘Faster! Much, much faster!’ Suddenly there was an intense flash of violent light behind them and something — it looked like a huge wave of gases and light — shot past them, rocking the treadmill where it floated in space. The turbulence seemed to go on and on, and the light grew brighter and brighter.

‘What was that?’ Sonic asked, startled.

‘The Big Bang, you twerp!’ Tails said. He slumped back against the read-outs. ‘That's it. It's all over. The Emeralds are in there somewhere, their chaos is being spread all over the universe, into the basic structure of everything. We're sunk. We lost. *Game over!*’

‘Get back on the treadmill and listen, you orange wimp,’ Sonic instructed. ‘It ain't over till the fat lady sings, and I don't hear nobody warbling.’ He kept running, his legs whizzing in a blue blur, forcing the treads to rotate at a huge speed. The numbers on the read-out were already flying forward.

‘What can we do?’ asked Tails.

‘Listen. That light gassy thing that just passed us was a wave, right? And time is a lot like other things, according to Kintobor, right? So it's probably moving in a wave too. Which means that although the Big Bang behind us is full of chaos and stuff, that new history is moving up, through history, like a kind of wave. If we stay ahead of the wave, we can get back to our time and do something to stop it.’

‘So,’ Tails said, beginning to understand, ‘we're going surfing on a wave made of time?’

‘Yeah!’ Sonic said. ‘Now get on and give me some extra power here. We gotta stay ahead of the wave. If we wipe out, everything's wiped out!’

Tails leaped back onto the treadmill and started running as fast as he could. Around them, he could see stars and planets beginning to form out of the gassy matter that had exploded from the Big Bang.

‘So how do we stop it happening?’ he asked. ‘Blow up Arctur's ship, or something?’

‘No good, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘Now they know about the Emeralds, they won't rest until they've got them. I got a better idea from something Arctur said; whatever we do will not save the universe. That's it. It's not what we do, it's what we *undo*.’

‘Like what?’

‘It's totally bogus, dude, but it's the only thing that'll save us. None of this would have happened if we hadn't stopped Doc Kintobor turning into Robotnik. We gotta turn him back again.’

13
SONICS (AGAIN)

Surrounded by its bubble of force-field, the tiny craft sped on through time. Behind it, invisible and unimaginable, rushed a wave of pure chaos: a wave which, if it was allowed to break, would wash every trace of civilisation and order from every inhabited planet in the universe. Empires would crumble in the twitch of an eye, replaced by ruins and gibbering insanity. The laws of physics would evaporate to become chaotic, random and perverse. Everything would be shifting, undecided and unknown.

Inside the bubble, Sonic and Tails were still running together as fast as they could. The exhaustion of their first long trip back in history was already telling on their faces, but they dared not give up the race. Their shoes, worn and beginning to split, beat in rhythm on the metal of the treadmill's rotating belt, carrying their energy to the mysterious machinery that Doctor Kintobor had welded to the underside of the machine. Now they were heading back into the future, to use his own invention to destroy him.

‘It's the only hope, dude,’ Sonic said.

‘No way —’

‘Way! You know it. If we let Doc K become Robotnik, Mobius falls right back into its old history line. He snatches the Chaos Emeralds and puts them in the Warps of Confusion, and tries to take over the planet, and I battle him and win. If Arctur tries to invade during that, Robotnik will have so many fantastic machines and weapons he'll be able to bust his chops, no problem. And even if he can't, I'd

like to see that oaf try to get the emeralds out of the Warps.' He smiled, remembering his own difficulties in retrieving the glistening crystals from their spinning orbiting homes.

'But I like the Doc the way he is!' the fox wailed.

'So do I, dude, but this is more important than that. We don't have time to warn the geeks in the Fourth Dimension, so we gotta handle it ourselves. Now, run.'

Sonic was determined. If only he did not feel so tired. His legs and arms were aching and there were still five billion more years to go. His feet felt like they were pounded raw, and his shoes were beginning to fall apart, the fabric flapping with each pace.

As they sped forward, the gases around them came together and formed Mobius's solar system. The sun burst into bright life, and the time-treadmill settled on one of the planets: a molten ball of boiling rocks and metals. The view looked just like it had on the way out, except in perfect reverse. The crust of the planet solidified, became pitted and cratered, spouted volcanoes, cooled, developed seas and lakes, and then small plants, grasses and finally animals.

'We're coming home,' Tails panted from behind Sonic. The hedgehog did not look round, but his buddy sounded even more exhausted than he was. Still, they had come so far and could not give up now. The planet evolving around them was unchanged by the chaos wave: perhaps they had made it in time.

The landscape changed and settled into the formation that they knew as the Green Hill Zone, but still with trees in unfamiliar positions. They sprouted, grew and fell as the heroes ran on. Sonic kept glancing between the view through the force-field and the numbers on the read-out.

The bottom row was back up to its figure of seventeen billion years, but the top row was almost all zeroes.

‘When I say stop,’ Sonic said, ‘stop dead, okay?’

‘No problem,’ Tails said. ‘I feel dead already.’ The figures on the read-out ticked onwards, counting down towards the right moment. Sonic knew that they did not want to travel right back to the moment they left; they had to hit the moment when Kintobor was transformed into Robotnik, or the moment when they had stopped it happening. It was the same moment, but in two different time-lines, and they had to switch history from one line to the other, like a runaway train.

‘Thirty days, six hours — slow down, Tails,’ Sonic said, watching the green fields of the zone around them. After moving through time at such a high speed, this looked almost normal, but they were still moving steadily forward through time. Suddenly two flashes of colour, one blue and one orange, sped across his field of vision and disappeared into the entrance of the tunnel leading down into Kintobor's underground home.

‘*STOP!*’ he yelled. The time treadmill slammed to a halt, and Sonic clicked off the force-field. The two animals dived for the tunnel, both knowing that there was not a second to spare.

‘Remember,’ Sonic whispered as they made their way down the tunnel as fast and as quietly as possible, ‘Kintobor's got to be close to the ROCC when the green button gets pressed.’

‘Gotcha,’ Tails replied. From ahead came muffled soundbites of conversation.

‘It's snack time,’ came a familiar voice. ‘Can I get you something?’

Sonic stopped in the tunnel. ‘That was me. We did it, dude. We're just in time.’

‘We haven't done it yet.’ Tails pointed out into Kintobor's laboratory. The scene was familiar, exactly as they had seen it last time they were here. The scientist was standing by the ROCC control desk, while a blue hedgehog was walking over to the fridge in the alcove that doubled as a kitchen. He opened the door, took something out and wandered back with it. ‘Sure you want to eat this?’ he asked Kintobor. ‘I think it's —’

‘*GO!*’ yelled another, similar voice, and from behind a cabinet at the edge of the room leaped another blue hedgehog and a furry orange fox.

Tails stared at them. ‘Whoooah,’ he breathed.

‘*STOP!*’ shouted Sonic, leaping out of the tunnel. ‘Friends, roamers, dudes, listen up, because the fate of the universe depends on this.’ Tails watched from the safety of the tunnel. He was not sure exactly what Sonic was trying to do: he knew that back when he had been here before, trying to save Kintobor from his machine, the sudden appearance of another Sonic and Tails would not have stopped him.

Sonic's shout attracted the attention of everyone in the room, and they all turned to look at him. The earlier Sonic and Tails, still in mid-jump, tried to turn in the air, and instead fell to the ground. As before, Tails plummeted into the Sonic who was standing near Kintobor, holding the rotten egg in his paw. The two tumbled to the floor and the egg was knocked upwards, spinning through the air.

Tails watched as Sonic — his Sonic, the most up-to-date model, with the worn-out sneakers — sprinted across the room at supersonic speed. There was plenty of space for a run-up and the hedgehog took full advantage of it to

hit top speed and catapult himself into the air, soaring over the tangle of Tails Two and Sonic One on the floor, and the second Sonic who had landed close to Doctor Kintobor. As the real Sonic shot through the air above his head, the one below him bent his knees and flung himself upwards after his duplicate like a comet. Together they shot towards the egg, which was just beginning to drop back towards the control desk of the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor below. It was dropping towards the green button, which would trigger the ROCC — and, Tails knew, make it explode.

He watched as the second Sonic flung out a hand to catch the egg as it fell. He missed it and the oval missile bounced off his arm, back into the air. Sonic Three caught it on one of his battered running shoes, flicked it up, grabbed it with one paw and tossed it down towards Kintobor, who caught it in surprise.

The second Sonic looked up to watch this, and was not looking where his flight path was taking him. In a second he had dropped down, out of the air and onto the control desk, one of his bright red shoes landing exactly on the green button.

There was an almighty flash, and the muffled boom of a small explosion within the ROCC machine. The glittering force-field which surrounded it began to swell outwards, to encompass Kintobor within its aura — and further, covering the control desk and the figure of the surprised Sonic who still stood on it. Beams of powerful light lanced within the force-field; connecting the Chaos Emeralds into a single unit of flashing energy.

Then two more beams lanced out. One hit the paralysed Kintobor in the middle of his forehead. His body began to change, shrinking in height and swelling in girth. The buttons on his shirt popped off. The hair on his head

seemed to slide back into his scalp, and then down and out of his nose as his orange moustache sprouted and grew, becoming huge and bristling. His expression grew ferocious and manic. A sickly smell of rotten eggs filled the room.

Tails's attention was focused on the figure of Sonic, trapped on the control desk. The hedgehog's body was flashing wildly as another beam of chaos-light struck his forehead and held him rigid in its grasp. His face was contorted with terrible suffering, but as the fox watched it changed into one of gleeful evil, grinning with malice. The flashing slowed down, and Tails could see that the hedgehog's body was now a negative of itself. What had been blue was now white, and the white parts were blue. His shoes and gloves were a vivid green.

There was a colossal crash from inside the machine, the force-field flicked off, and with a roar the device exploded, blowing a hole in the roof. Thousands of sparkling golden rings were flung upwards by the force of the blast, rising high into the blue sky above, and back down to bounce their way across the face of the planet. A handful fell back down, ricocheting around the workshop.

The remaining animals — the original Sonic, the Sonic with the beaten-up shoes and two two-tailed Tailses — gathered by the tunnel entrance, watching the two figures who stood by the remains of the ROCC. The fat one, his new features almost like an egg, turned to glare at them.

‘What are you vile rodents gawking at?’ he bellowed. ‘Come here, so I can encase you in metal and make robots out of you.’

‘Chill, Doc,’ said the original Sonic, stepping forward. ‘That was a killer blast, but you'll be okay.’

‘My name is no longer Kintobor, you foul creature. From now on I am Robotnik, and I am going to rule this

planet! The Emeralds — the secret is in them! I see it all now!’

‘As do I,’ snarled another voice. The second Sonic, now white and blue instead of blue and white, jumped down from the smoking remains of the control desk to land beside Robotnik.

‘Sonic!’ the other Tails squeaked.

‘Not Sonic, you furry jerk,’ the creature hissed. ‘I am Cinos, the Anti-Sonic, and you homeboys are in big trouble.’

‘Bogus!’ exclaimed both Tailses together.

‘I'll get him!’ yelled the original Sonic, about to leap into the attack. Tails grabbed his arm.

‘Don't!’ he said. ‘If you hit him, the two of you will just merge into one, and we don't know if that one would be good or evil. You blue guys deal with Robotnik; we Tailses will handle this Cinos bloke.’

‘You're the boss!’ the other Sonic yelled, already hurtling around the room towards the startled mad scientist. He screeched and ran out of the room, two identical hedgehogs in hot pursuit. Cinos glowered at the two foxes.

‘You're gonna handle me, huh?’ he said. ‘Handle with care, that's my advice.’ He spun through the air towards them. Tails wrenched his body out of the way of the oncoming missile, ducking to the floor to avoid the chaos-filled hedgehog's Spin Attack. His hand landed on a gold ring which lay there, and he picked it up, an idea beginning to germinate in his mind.

‘Tails, grab the rings!’ he shouted, then leaped into the air as the hedgehog charged through the spot where he had been standing a moment ago. The other fox nodded briefly, body-dodged to avoid the speeding Cinos, and

leaped up onto a cabinet to rescue a ring which had landed there. ‘How many do we need?’ he shouted.

‘As many as possible, at least four,’ Tails replied. ‘Duck!’ The other fox doubled over and Cinos sped over his head in a ball of white fury. From the passageway came a hum, and a small, fat flying machine sped out of it, hovering a few feet above the ground. Tails recognised it as the Egg-o-Matic. It stopped for a moment in the middle of the room and a net flopped out of a trapdoor in its bottom, dropping over the remains of the ROCC — and the six Chaos Emeralds within.

‘Stop him!’ came a cry, and the two Sonics leaped back into the room. One of them hurtled through the air to hit the Egg-o-Matic with a resounding thwack, but already Robotnik's machine was rising out of the hole in the roof, carrying the emeralds with it. Tails turned to watch it go, but then there was a whiz and he whirled around, just in time to dodge another ferocious attack from Cinos. As the hedgehog shot past, Tails stuck out his leg. The chaos-creature's green trainer caught on it and he went sprawling. Tails leaped onto his back, holding him on the floor.

‘Tails!’ he shouted. In a second the other fox was beside him, carrying three gold rings. ‘Put the rings over his arms and legs. They're chaos-proof; they may help to neutralise the energy.’ Deftly they slid rings over the prone, wriggling hedgehog's limbs. For a second the white and blue faded to become blue and white, but then faded back.

‘It's not working!’ bewailed the other fox. ‘We need another source of anti-chaos energy. But where are we going to find something like that?’

From the other side of the room, one of the two Sonics stepped forward, his worn shoes flapping on the floor. ‘I'm

about as anti-chaos as you can get, dudes,’ he said. ‘Besides, this place is getting crowded. Stand back.’

‘No!’ Tails gasped, but it was too late. Sonic had reached down to touch Cinos on the arm. As before, the instant the two bodies met they began to meld together, morphing into one. The blue of Sonic's arm blended with the white of Cinos's, forming veins and strands of both colours that looked for a second like marble or two paints mixing together. The gloves joined, flickering between green and white. The two hedgehogs slid into one body, which pulsated and blinked with colour and energy. The being's face twisted, changing between expressions of complete evil and high coolness. Tails, still sitting on the hedgehog's back, was finding it hard to keep his seat on the struggling body.

Finally the violent spasms slowed down and the colour changes began to stabilise, flicking between a muddy grey and a light blue. At last the blue solidified and became deeper. The creature lying on the floor looked like Sonic, apart from the gold rings still decorating his arms and legs. but Tails could not be sure.

‘Is that you, Sonic?’ he asked.

‘Of course it's me, dude,’ came the reply. ‘Gerroff me!’

‘It could be a trick,’ cautioned the other fox. ‘Hey, sonic, who's the ruler of Mobius?’

‘Mobius doesn't have a ruler, you divot,’ said the hedgehog.

‘That's Sonic all right,’ Tails said, and stood up. Sonic rose to his feet slowly, brushing dust and small pieces of the ROCC off him. The gold rings clattered off his arms and legs, and fell to the floor.

‘Ha ha ha! Now I can destroy you all!’ he sneered. Everyone jumped. ‘Only joking, dudes. I'm cool. We did it,

dude! We saved the universe from the mythos creatures! All right! Way to go!’

‘Yay! Whoopee! Good show!’ exclaimed Tails. There was a cough from behind them. It was the other Sonic.

‘Could one of you supercool dudes please tell me just what went down here?’ he asked plaintively. Sonic and the two Tailses looked at each other, not quite knowing where to start. Tails was about to begin, when another voice cut in from the entrance to the tunnel.

‘Unauthorised time violations, the changing of history and the creation of temporal paradoxes,’ it said. ‘Everyone here is under arrest by order of the Organiser Time Police.’

Sonic turned to the new arrival. ‘Yo, Captain Karl,’ he said. ‘Glad you could make it, dude. Hey, we just saved the universe — show us some gratitude, yeah?’

‘Oh, it's you,’ the captain sniffed gruffly, striding into the room, flanked by two armed Time Police officers. ‘I remember you lot. You were granted a one-use licence to take out that bloke Rotobobkin or something. Did you get him?’

‘Yes and no,’ Sonic said. ‘Or rather yes, then no. We ran into some mythos dudes along the way, and they were planning to perform open-heart surgery on the Big Bang. So we stopped them.’

Captain Karl looked impressed. ‘Good work,’ he said. ‘But seeing as how you didn't manage to fulfil your main mission, and ran into some time trouble along the way, seeing as how there's now two of each of you here, this whole mess needs to be sorted out. You four are coming with me, back to the Fourth Dimension. Elder Jay will know what to do.’

Sonic — one of the Sonics — shook his head. ‘Thanks for the offer, dude,’ he said, ‘but I know what to do. We may need a hand, though.’

‘What's your plan?’ a Tails asked.

‘Okay. We know that Robotnik got his sticky fingers on one of the Organisers' time machines — the Mark-0 — and we know that he'd invented a machine that can cross dimensions. I bet he made the machine, popped through to find what was on the other side, and found himself wherever the Mark-0 was being kept. Now. if the four of us are there to meet him when he pops through —’

‘Yeah!’ Tails said. ‘Just so long as I don't have to meet that Carrie again. Eugh!’

Captain Karl tapped something into a hand-held computer. ‘It sounds plausible enough to me,’ he said. ‘Records say that there was only one half hour when that time machine could have been stolen. If we travel back to then, you can stop your Rokintob fellow nicking our device. There's to be no changing of history, you understand? Don't try to kill him or capture him. Just make sure he doesn't get the time machine.’

‘Sounds fair,’ one Sonic said.

‘Hey, dudes,’ said the other. ‘Do you think I should come with you, or chill here? I mean, with that nutty fat guy running around now, someone's gotta look after the zone.’

‘We need you,’ Sonic said. ‘The zone will be safe enough for an hour or two.’ He looked around the ruins of the laboratory, and noticed something. Lying beside one of the work benches was a Mark-0 time machine: the one that the other Sonic and Tails must have used to get here. He picked it up and looked at it, recognising the pattern of

dents on its surface. Captain Karl held out his hand for it, but Sonic refused.

‘No way, man,’ he said. ‘You said no altering history. Four years from now I trip over this thing lying on the ground outside. If I don't put it out there, I won't ever trip over it. Understand?’

The captain looked dubious for a moment, then nodded. ‘All right. But if you've got any other time devices around here, you'll need to surrender them to us.’

‘It's outside,’ Tails said. Together, the four animals and the three Time Police climbed the tunnel out of the laboratory. Sonic looked around. He remembered the direction he had been racing when he tripped over the time machine, but he did not remember exactly where it had been. He closed his eyes, turned round three times and chucked the silvery metal machine over his shoulder. It disappeared into the long grass, hidden from view. Its exact position did not matter: he knew that his foot would find it again.

‘Right, we're ready,’ he said. ‘This is the time-treadmill. It may not look like much, but it took us to the Big Bang and back.’

Captain Karl whistled. ‘No wonder it looks so beat up,’ he said.

It did look beat up. The metal was scratched, the treads were flattened and worn from the relentless pounding they had received, and the machine was dented and scarred. Still, it looked perfectly serviceable. The animals jumped onto it.

‘Come on, there's room for everyone,’ Sonic said. With a slight reluctance the Time Police stepped on as well. It was a bit of a squash, but everyone just fitted onto the metal platform.

‘We need to travel back in time here, said Captain Karl. ‘No time travel in the Fourth Dimension, remember Take us, let's see - four years, five months, twelve days and eight hours forward.’

‘You'll have to help too, time cop dudes,’ Sonic said. ‘By the left foot, when I say go… Go!’ Seven pairs of shoes shuffled into life and the numbers on the time-treadmill's read-out began to move forward. Around them, days and nights flickered past as the zone cycled from summer to autumn, then through winter and spring and back to summer. Their speed increased slightly. Sonic, sandwiched between the two Tailses. kept a careful eye on the read-out.

‘Almost there,’ he warned. ‘Stop!’ The machine came to a standstill and one of the Time Police fell off the back. It was early evening in the zone on a fine day in late spring, everything was quiet.

‘Everyone stay on the platform,’ the captain said, triggering the device he held in his hand. A shimmering bubble appeared around the group, solidified and seemed to drop into the earth. juddering and shaking violently as it went. The original Sonic looked worried.

‘What's going down?’ he asked.

‘We are, man.’ the real Tails said. ‘It's cool. We've done this before.’

Sonic turned to Captain Karl. ‘How are you cop dudes doing against that invasion?’ he asked.

‘Not good. When we left they were bringing in reinforcements, preparing for a final push. We've already had to pull back our forces from the Research and Development levels. It's looking pretty desperate.’ The captain's expression matched his words.

‘Can't you dudes get reinforcements too?’ asked Sonic. I thought the science dudes told us the Fourth Dimension was infinite — going on forever and ever, endless corridors and stuff?’

‘It is,’ said the captain. ‘But most of it is unoccupied. There are only about ten thousand Organisers. Hold on. were here.’

The bubble of light that surrounded them disappeared, and they were standing in a familiar room with a concrete floor and walls, lined with shelves covered in items of miscellaneous equipment, much of it unidentifiable. This time, earlier in time than the heroes' first two visits, the room was clean and there was no sign of battle damage to the walls or door. The time-treadmill settled to the floor with a wheeze. Something inside it clanked heavily and went *phut*. A small puff of black smoke rose from its underside.

‘I'm afraid your machine's had it,’ said Captain Karl. ‘Sorry about that. The extra weight must have been too much for it. Still, we were going to have to confiscate it anyway, so it's all for the best.’

‘No problem,’ Sonic said. ‘Now everybody get out of sight. I've got a prickling in my spines, and that usually means something weird's about to happen.’

The three cops scattered, crouching down behind shelving units and items of furniture around the room. The two hedgehogs and two foxes zipped behind a large row of shelves in the middle of the room, peering out around the edges and peeking between the items of equipment scattered on them.

Something weird did start to happen. A large circle of green light began to appear out of nothing, hanging in the centre of the room, a few centimetres off the floor. It was

about three metres across, faint at first, but quickly brightened. The middle of it flickered and snapped with a grey static, like a television tuned to a dead channel. It looked like nothing at all. Sonic and both Tailses nodded as they recognised it. The other Sonic looked baffled.

'What *is* this?' he asked.

'Shhh. Just stand there. You look great,' Tails whispered. A faint noise came from out of the circle of greyness. It sounded like a maniac laughing very loudly, and it was getting closer. In the middle of the grey area, a silvery-red speck appeared, shooting towards the circle of green light at amazing speed, and emerged into the room with a pop. It was Robotnik in his Egg-o-Matic.

'Ha ha ha!' he laughed. 'Ha ha ha ha! Dimensional transference! My beautiful machine works! Ha ha ha! Now where am I?' He pulled a large map out of the cockpit beside him and began to consult it.

Sonic stepped forward from behind the row of shelves. 'Welcome to our humble dimension, traveller. May I, as the president of the Fourth Dimension, be the first to congratulate you?' he said in a stiff, proper voice quite unlike his own.

Robotnik looked up. 'Ak! Erk! Sonic!' he squeaked.

Tails, behind the shelves, gestured to the other Sonic to show himself. The hedgehog, obviously puzzled, did so.

'Awrk!' exclaimed Robotnik. 'Two Sonics! There were two Sonics in my laboratory, but… But that's not possible. Ahem. Honoured sirs. Does everyone in this dimension look — ha ha ha — like yourselves?' He laughed nervously.

Sonic was finding it hard to suppress a smile. 'Most of us, dude — I mean, honoured visitor. The others look a little different.' The two Tailses realised that was their cue,

and stepped out from behind the other end of the shelves. Robotnik stared at them in horror.

‘Nooo! An entire dimension filled with blue hedgehogs and orange foxes! Horrible, horrible, horrible!’ He grabbed for the Egg-o-Matic's controls, turning the tiny craft around. ‘I'm going to smash that dimension-crossing machine — if it only gets me to places like this, it's useless!’ He zipped back into the greyness within the circle of green light, which shrank down to the size of a coin, and disappeared with a sound like a frog swallowing a football.

‘Wahoo!’ Tails shouted. ‘We got him! He never gets the time-travel device now! Excellent!’ The two foxes reached into the air and smacked their paws together in a solid high-five.

‘No, don't!’ Sonic shouted, but it was too late. At the first contact the two foxes had begun to blend and join together, just as the hedgehog had done with his duplicate earlier on. He could only watch as the two foxes morphed into a single body, which looked around itself in confusion.

‘That felt *weird*,’ Tails said.

‘Doesn't it?’ Sonic said. ‘Come on. We've still got a couple of loose ends to tie up.’ The other Sonic coughed gently behind him. ‘Yeah,’ Sonic said, ‘you're the first. Thanks a lot for your help, dude. It's been an education meeting you, and I hope by watching me you've learned just how cool a dude you are. Don't let nobody diss you. Oh, and watch out for those Buzz-Bombers.’

‘What?’ the other Sonic said.

‘You'll see. Give our regards to the Green Hill Zone,’ Sonic said, smiling. One of Captain Karl's soldiers took the puzzled hedgehog by the arm. A ball of white light formed

around the two figures, and dropped suddenly into the floor.

‘He's on his way home,’ the captain said.

‘Coolness,’ Tails said. ‘So, Sonic, what'll happen now?’

The hedgehog looked pensive. ‘Okay. Robotnik is gonna be Robotnik, because we erased the time-line with Kintobor in it. Unfortunately.’ He paused a second, thinking of the scientist he would never see again. ‘So he has dimension-crossing technology but he thinks it's such bad news that he'll never use it. That means he doesn't get his hands on the Mark-0 time machine, so the Green Hill Zone never starts changing, so I guess we never get catapulted into the Fourth Dimension at all, so none of this ever really happened.’

‘*So why are we still here?*’

‘Time paradoxes don't work in the Fourth Dimension,’ reminded Captain Karl. ‘There was a special error-trapping routine programmed into its design. You'll stay here until you decide to return to your own dimension.’

‘Whoooah! Wish I had one of those error-trapping gizmos,’ Sonic said. ‘Right. Back in the zone, I guess I'll still trip over the time machine, so you'll still win that race. Chill, Tails: I'll help you with the washing-up.’

‘You said there was still another loose end to clear up,’ said the Captain. ‘What is it?’

‘Hey, dude, priorities first,’ Sonic said. ‘Tails and me, we've run all the way to the Big Bang and back, we've defeated an evil chaos version of myself and changed history about three times. I'm hungry. I'll tell you while we eat. But I'll give you a clue: something you said earlier has given me a most excellent idea.’

A few hours later, in one of the featureless corridors of the Fourth Dimension, a squad of figures in shiny black armour were advancing into what their scouts had reported was an unoccupied area. The soldiers casually held their guns pointed at the floor, not expecting any resistance, and so were very surprised when every doorway along the length of the corridor burst open and hordes of figures in silver uniforms burst out, pointing stun-guns at them.

‘DROP YOUR WEAPONS, DUDES!’ boomed an amplified voice and Sonic strode to the front of the army of Organiser Time Police, carrying a megaphone. There was a rattle and clatter as the members of the mythos army let their many guns, rifles, swords, knives and cudgels fall to the floor. Sonic lowered the megaphone and walked forward, up to the familiar figure of the leader of the advance squad.

‘Come on, big guy. Got a surprise for you,’ he said.

‘I am not “big guy”, I am Arctur. Arctur the dragonkin,’ snarled the leader. ‘Do I know you?’

‘And I am Sonic. Sonic the Hedgehog,’ replied Sonic with a grin. ‘We haven't met before, dude, but we will. Or we would have done. Or something. Come on, bring your troops.’

‘Arctur the dragonkin does not surrender to anyone!’ boomed the lizard in an imperial tone. ‘Death before dishonour and all that.’

‘We're not asking you to surrender, dude,’ Sonic said. We re asking you to come and negotiate a peace deal.’

The lizard's golden eyes almost bulged out of his head with surprise. ‘A peace deal?’ he uttered in a strangulated voice. ‘But the Organisers wish to wipe all us mythological

creatures from the face of the universe. There can be no peace!’

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ Sonic said. ‘Come on.’

He led the mythos creatures, surrounded by the Time Police, through the network of corridors, stairs and lifts towards the massive chambers of the Science Council. The crowd of scientists had disappeared from the anteroom and the doors of the chamber were held open by two more Time Police in full ceremonial uniform. Inside, the full Science Council sat in their heavy gold and silver robes, and among them sat the members of the Time Police Court in their gleaming silver uniforms. The huge room was full of people, all watching silently as Sonic, Tails, Captain Karl and the eight-being squad of mythos creatures walked in through the door and onto the round dais in the centre of the room. From the front row of seats, Elder Jay stood up and joined the group of figures there.

‘OK,’ Sonic said. ‘This is the big one: trying to arrange a peace deal between the Organisers, represented here by Elder Jay for the Science Council and Captain Karl for the Time Police, and the mythos army, represented by Arctur the dragonkin who is… I don't know what rank he is but he's got a huge spacecraft.’

‘I am a member of the Pantheon,’ boomed Arctur dramatically, clearly not phased by the huge audience. ‘My word is law among the forces of the mythos.’

‘Okay, so he's a bigwig too,’ Sonic said. ‘Me, I'm Sonic the Hedgehog and this is my buddy Tails. We're freelance heroes. And we've been looking around your dimension here, and hearing about this war that you guys have got going on between you, and we think we can sort it. Elder Jay, babe, tell us all why your side is fighting the mythos creatures.’

Jay stepped forward. ‘The Science Council believes in science,’ she began. ‘Pure, unemotional science, which proves what can be, and what can't, and these are the rules that we use to decide how we police the universe and time. Mythos creatures are the exact opposite. They shouldn't exist at all, because they're fictional.’

‘That never stopped me,’ Tails whispered. Sonic shushed him.

‘The mythos creatures are beings of magic, and of imagination. They do not conform to the laws of science as we see them,’ Jay continued. ‘Their existence not only defies the laws which we follow and obey, but also encourages others to flaunt those laws. That is why we believe they should not exist, and why we have waged war on them for so long.’ She sat down to applause.

‘Arctur, you're up next,’ Sonic said.

The dragonkin stepped to the centre of the dais. A spotlight shone down on him from above. ‘Suit — release me,’ he said, and his sleek black uniform coiled away down his body to the floor. Under it he wore a massive metal breastplate, designed and carved into an intricate pattern and enamelled in bright colours. It was obviously the armour of a warrior-chief. Arctur flexed his shoulders and the odd projections on his back which Sonic had noticed under his uniform unfurled into mighty wings, each four or five metres in length. He looked magnificent. Sonic and Tails stepped back, awestruck. The spotlight gleamed on Arctur's huge head and reflected in his golden eyes.

‘I am Arctur the dragonkin,’ he said. ‘This is how I was created: a being of sorcery and magic. I may not exist in the way that scientists say I should, but I did not ask to be this way. I have no choice: I am a thing of magic. That is my nature. You Science Councillors and Time Police, with your high ideals, you cannot see beyond the end of your

tiny noses. Yes, your science says I cannot exist, but I do exist. And I and my kind existed peacefully for many years until you attacked us. Here I am. Look at me.

‘Your laws of science cannot tell you everything about the universe. They do not explain beauty, or art, or emotions. They do not explain life, and they do not explain me. Until you know everything there is to know, you cannot say truly what should exist and what should not. When you pretended to have more knowledge than you do, and condemned me and every being like me to non-existence, we took up weapons technology — your accursed sciences —and fought against you; and we will do so until either you let us be, or until we defeat you.’

He stepped back. There was no applause, but Sonic could tell that the audience were quietly impressed by his words. The hedgehog walked to the centre of the dais.

‘Okay, dudes, dudettes, dude-things, Elder dudes, dragonkin dudes and etceteras. That's the way things are. Now, here we are at the centre of an infinite dimension, with billions and billions of floors, corridors, empty rooms and all that, going on forever in all directions. And you've got about ten thousand people living here. Not many, for so much space.

‘Also, this is the Fourth Dimension. It's a weird place. No time travel. No paradoxes. Get it? If this place breaks your own laws, then maybe those laws aren't as solid as you dudes like to think.

‘The mythos creatures don't have a home, and they want one. You guys have plenty of spare space. You also have a Time Police force who have never caught a single criminal. Sounds like they could do with a hand. I've seen the mythos posse fight, and you could learn some lessons from them.

‘This is the deal: take a floor in the dimension, and call it a neutral zone. Everything above that floor is Organiser territory, and everything below it is mythos creature territory. And you guys stop fighting and work together to stop other bogus dudes messing up the universe and time. I think it would work.’

There was a small commotion in the front row of the Council and Elder Kay, leader of the Time Police, stood up.

‘Why?’ she demanded. ‘Why should we make peace and work with those — those things?’

Sonic turned to Captain Karl. ‘Tell 'em what'll happen in a month if they don't, ranking dude.’

Karl turned around. ‘I've, er, I've come back from a month in the future,’ he said. ‘Things are bad there. We reckon we might be able to hold out for another three days before we're completely overrun by the mythos army. They've already got the research and development levels, and have tried to use our time-travel technology to alter history to annihilate us. Thankfully Sonic and Tails saved us from that. But it's bad. Basically, I say we make peace now, or in a month's time we lose this war.’

There was a moment of stunned silence in the Council chamber, and then a hubbub grew as the assembled minds digested this news and debated its implications with their neighbours. Elder Jay turned to look up at Arctur, who towered over her.

‘Do you think we could work together?’ she said.

The massive dragonkin twitched his wings. ‘I am thinking it over,’ he said. ‘Please. Let me contemplate in peace.’

Jay turned to Sonic. ‘I have to admit he's impressive,’ she admitted. ‘So stately and proud.’

‘So what's your verdict? Peace or war?’ Sonic asked.

‘That's up to the Council. Even if they say peace, it sounds as if Arctur holds all the cards. If he still says war, then it will be war,’ she said.

Sonic sighed in irritation and tapped his foot on the floor. Tails yawned. The decision-making was taken a very long time. Finally the low level of conversation faded away, and Jay strode to the edge of the dais.

‘My fellow Organisers,’ she said. ‘The issue before us is possibly the most serious we have ever had to face. Please prepare to cast your votes on the plan which Sonic the Hedgehog, the hero from another dimension, has placed before us for our judgement. Press your keypads — *now*.’

Sonic looked up. Above the dais, floating in the air, was a single word formed of pure light: PEACE. Next to him, the dragonkin flexed his body and peered upwards at the judgement above him, taking it in without comment. The room was quiet around them.

‘How about you, Arctur?’ asked Sonic, his voice echoing very slightly in the silent chamber. ‘Do you say war, or peace?’

‘I have considered the matter, and given it a full scientific analysis,’ he said, smiling slightly at his ironic joke. ‘Your plan is good, Sonic the Hedgehog. We say let there be peace.’

Sonic was about to say something cool, but his words were drowned out by applause as everyone in the chamber rose to their feet, applauding and cheering. Elder Jay, smiling with a huge smile, flung herself at him, wrapped her arms around him and planted a smacking kiss on his cheek, then stood on tiptoe as the dragonkin reached down with one scaly claw to shake her hand. Sonic

punched Tails on the shoulder, shook Captain Karl's hand, and the various hands, claws and appendages of the mythos soldiers. Finally he looked up. Arctur was looking down at him, then slowly lifted his right arm into the air, his right hand raised. Sonic grinned, bent his knees and leaped into the air, hurtling upwards. As the applause reached a crescendo, Sonic slapped the dragonkin's vast hand in a triumphant high-five.

EPILOGUE

‘Nice speech, mate. So that's all the loose ends tied up?’ Tails asked.

‘Not quite, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘There's still a couple of things we have to do before everything's back to normal.’

The small one-use time machine in his paw went ‘Phut!’ as it auto-detonated and crumbled to dust, running through his fingers.

‘That was one of them.’ He walked away, across the verdant grass of the Green Hill Zone.

‘I hope that was biodegradable,’ Tails worried, trotting after him. ‘So where are we going?’

‘We're going to go and find us,’ Sonic said.

‘But I thought we'd got rid of all the time paradoxes!’ Tails said.

‘This one isn't a paradox. I got Grey to program the time machine to leave us here just before we left in the first place, so we can check that everything goes okay,’ Sonic said. ‘We meet up with ourselves, do that body-melding trick with them —’

‘Aw no! It felt so strange — like I was moving my mind into someone else's body, or something,’ the fox objected.

‘It's gotta be done, dude. After that, we head off to the picnic and watch carefully to see if anything funny happens. If not, then we're in the clear. If it does — well, we better hope that the dudes in the Fourth Dimension get their act together.’

‘I think they will,’ Tails said. ‘They were getting on very well when we left. So, um, if we're going to take over

at the moment we left off, and nothing happens, does that mean that the adventure never happened?’

Sonic paused for thought. It was something he had been wondering about: he was about to finish his greatest adventure of all time — literally! — but if he completed it successfully, it would cease to exist and nobody would remember it, so he could not boast about it in future. ‘That's just one of the perils of being in the hero business, dude,’ he said. ‘At least we'll remember it. And everyone in the Fourth Dimension too.’

‘Yeah,’ Tails said. ‘Hey, look, there we are.’ Just visible in the valley beyond were the familiar shapes of themselves. The blue hedgehog was holding a Game Gear, and the orange fox was trying to look over his shoulder at the action. As they watched, the hedgehog switched off the games machine and put it down on a nearby rock.

‘It's showtime, dude,’ whispered Sonic, and together they rushed into the valley. The two already there whirled around as they approached.

‘Who are you dudes, dudes?’ asked the Sonic.

‘We're you, come back in time from the future,’ Sonic said. ‘Good to see me, buddy. Let's shake.’ He and Tails stuck out their hands, the other animals reached out to take them, and a few seconds later only one Sonic and one Tails stood next to the rock with the Game Gear on it.

‘Cool,’ Sonic said. ‘Now what did we do next?’

‘You said “Now, what'll we do with the rest of this most triumphantly glorious afternoon?" and I said "Shall we go and join the others?” and you said “Good call. Race you. Loser does all the washing-up after the —” Hey, wait for me!’

Sonic, laughing, had already hurtled off towards the lake, streaking over the ground. His newly repaired shoes

felt snug and comfortable. The scientists in the Fourth Dimension had rebuilt them in thanks for arranging the peace deal with the mythos creatures, and had worked in some new features like automatic odour-removers and a self-cleaning system. He streaked ahead of Tails, who was struggling to catch up.

Ahead of him he could see the blue water of the lake, and his friends playing on the beach below. Sally Acorn had just finished laying out a picnic on a large rug. Porker Lewis, Joe Sushi and Tux were playing in the water, throwing a ball around, while Flicky fluttered above them. Chirps and Johnny Lightfoot were lying on the beach.

Oomph! He tripped over something sticking out of the ground, and fell flat on his face. Tails came racing up from behind him, did not notice the prone hedgehog and tripped over Sonic's outstretched legs. With a yell the fox stumbled and, spinning like a ball, hurtled down the hillside towards the beach. Sonic watched as he ploughed through the middle of the picnic and hit the water with a splash which drenched everyone around him.

The hedgehog sat up and pulled the object that had tripped him out of the ground. As he had suspected, it was the familiar shape of a begrimed, moss-encrusted Mark-0 Gauss-Coyne time machine. ‘I bet Captain Karl would love to get his hands on this,’ he murmured, then sprang to his feet and trotted down the hill towards the others. As he reached them, Sally was standing amidst the wreckage of the picnic, hands on hips, chastising Tails who stood, head lowered, looking sorry for himself.

‘If Sonic challenged you to a race, then you can both do the washing-up,’ said Sally, her voice filled with exasperation. ‘And there'll be plenty of it to do. Just *look* at the mess!’

Tails looked at Sonic. Sonic looked at Tails, remembering Sally's last fateful words before everything had begun to change. Slowly they both turned to look at where the picnic had lain on the sand. It was still there, apart from the part that Tails had rolled over. Together they heaved a deep sigh of relief.

‘Washing-up? No problem,’ Sonic said. ‘That's cool with me. Everything's cool.’

‘Hey, Sonic, what's that metal thing you're holding?’ enquired Johnny Lightfoot. Sonic looked down at the old time machine in his paws.

‘This?’ he said. ‘Oh just some old piece of junk I found. Nothing important.’ He whirled it around his head and threw it far out across the blue surface of the lake. It hit the water with a splash and sank from sight.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘that's that. Now let's eat.’

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